The Enchanted Hill

Peter B. Kyne

To Aunt Kipp
from Jen
Xmas 1929

The Enchanted Hill

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A NOVEL

Gail saw Purdy swing the machine-gun into position.

THE ENCHANTED HILL

BY

PETER B. KYNE

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NEVER THE TWAIN SHALL MEET,
KINDRED OF THE DUST,
CAPPY RICKS, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
DEAN CORNWELL

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TO RAY LONG

This volume is dedicated in profound appreciation of his friendship, his ever ready aid, his able editorial criticism and boundless enthusiasm, without which the author would be singularly helpless

The Illustrations
consist of
A Frontispiece and a Centerspread
Reproduced in Color from the
Original Paintings by
DEAN CORNWELL

The Enchanted Hill

CHAPTER I

A ZEPHYR, light as an angel's breath, bore the incense of yerba santa and sage across the level gray stretches of El Valle de los Ojos Negros; yet from this labor it reserved sufficient strength to turn the fans of a light windmill, the mechanism of which, lacking lubrication, creaked, banshee-like, at each lazy revolution. Grasshoppers, mysteriously impelled to hop, decided instead to fly, and droned lugubriously down wind; the telephone and telegraph wires, strung on poles along the railroad right of way, hummed faintly, like distant harpsichords badly out of tune; in the sycamore trees flanking the thin trickle of water that was the Rio Hondo in time of freshet, two crows cawed sociably; a woodpecker rendered his very best imitation of a riveting machine. Save for this diapason of minor sounds there was silence in San Onofre.

San Onofre was accustomed to silence. It was a flag station in the heart of El Valle de los Ojos Negros, and over it and the cattle corrals and loading chute, the complaining windmill and a five-thousand-gallon water-tank kept guard. It boasted neither station agent nor station loafers; even the trains did not stop

there to take on water, for the windmill and tank had been erected by the railroad company to supply water to the transient herds of cattle held in the corrals for car shipment, and for the horses and men who drove the cattle thither. Hence, except on those occasions when the cow-men who ranged in El Valle de los Ojos Negros and the public grazing lands in the forest reserve to the north and northeast drove their beef cattle in for shipment, no human voice competed in San Onofre with the zephyr, the grasshoppers, the crows and the woodpecker.

Alone in San Onofre, Lee Purdy sat on the lip of the loading chute and smoked a cigarette of his own manufacture. Half an hour previous, a westbound freight had picked up the ten carloads of steers he and his men had loaded that day, and the range boss and six men had accompanied the cattle to care for them en route and check up on the weights when the shipment should reach the stockyards in Los Angeles. Stockyards were the most recent innovation in that boom-throbbing metropolis, and it had occurred to Lee Purdy to test the California market with New Mexico range beef rather than the Kansas City or Chicago markets, which had absorbed his brand in the past.

Joaquin José Ramon Oreña y Sanchez, alleged cook, driving two mules hitched to the chuck wagon, had departed for the ranch headquarters immediately after serving the midday meal. To Joaquin, Lincoln Hallowell, the range boss, had entrusted his two best saddle-horses for return to the ranch. They were tethered at the tail-gate of the chuck wagon. The men who had not accompanied the beef shipment had also departed,

heading home straight across country and herding before them the small *remuda* which had accompanied the drive to San Onofre; presently, after resting, smoking and cogitating, Lee Purdy would follow. Meanwhile he sat on the lip of the loading chute, his soul steeped in a gentle melancholy, his muscles relaxed in pleasing lassitude, his mind vaguely alive to the realization that he had prodded three hundred recalcitrant three-year steers up that loading chute and into the cattle cars that day.

He sighed. He was weary. A prodder of steers was he, and prodding steers was work designed by Providence for men strong in the arm and thick in the head; nevertheless, he, Lee Purdy, who was strong of arm but not thick of head, had performed his monotonous task without complaint, with a certain joy even, albeit there had not been any urgent necessity for his accompanying the drive to San Onofre, there to deplete his youthful vitality by prodding unwilling and suspicious Herefords up a loading chute. Link Hallowell, his range boss, could have got on very well without him.

The vague melancholy hereinbefore referred to, however, had its genesis not in rebellion at the character of his labors, but in a very definite realization of their futility. The shipment of steers he had just started westward would not reimburse him for the cost of production. With good fortune he might hope to net sixty-five dollars a head; and only a month previous, in New York, he had partaken of a small steak in a not very well-known restaurant and had paid therefor the sum of one dollar and twenty-five cents. He wondered now how many such steaks a clever butcher might be

able to carve from the carcass of a thousand-pound steer.

"I ought to be a middleman," Lee Purdy told himself. "As a consumer and as a producer of beef I'm headed straight for economic ruin and vegetarianism."

He rested his tired body against the upright at the head of the loading chute and drowsed pleasurably in the mid-afternoon sunshine. The hum of the telegraph wires, the drone of the grasshoppers, the anesthesia of the clean, pure, aromatic air, lulled him little by little. He would rest awhile before commencing that forty-mile journey back to his ranch. He slept.

He awakened with a terrific start—the spasmodic reaction of one suddenly and violently plucked from the arms of Morpheus. Something had struck, with great force, the four-by-four-inch upright against which his head had been resting; the impact had been disturbingly close to his head. As he jerked upward, his ears registered on his sleep-drugged brain the clear, sharp crack of a high-power rifle; even as the thought came to him that somebody had deliberately used the Purdy head for a target, he lost his balance and fell in a ludicrous heap to the ground under the lip of the loading chute. Thereupon his guardian angel whispered to him to lie perfectly still.

He did. In about thirty seconds a second bullet ripped a hole through the shoulder of his canvas jacket and lost itself somewhere out on the sage. Still Purdy remained motionless, although a sharp, burning sensation on his shoulder informed him that the bullet, in its passage, had barely touched his skin and seared it.

He had but one chance in a million to live and he was taking advantage of that chance. Somebody was striving to kill him from ambush, and if the killer could be induced to believe he had accomplished his purpose, Lee Purdy hoped he might be inclined to ponder the futility of wasting additional ammunition on a corpse.

Lee Purdy knew that no murderer, fully convinced that he has killed his man at, say, four hundred yards, cares to walk that distance to view at close range the still and gory tribute to his skill. Wherefore, Purdy lay as he had fallen from the loading chute—on his left side, with his left arm thrust out under his head and his legs drawn up slightly. And as he lay thus, wondering if the bushwhacker would try a third shot for luck, two crows flew agitatedly over his head, and there was heard no longer their cawing or the *rat-tat-tat-tat-tat* of the woodpecker in the sycamore trees along the Rio Hondo. The Rio Hondo, a wide boulder-strewn wash perhaps three feet below the level of the surrounding country, paralleled the railroad tracks at a distance of about three hundred yards on the south. Purdy reasoned that the man who had shot at him had doubtless crept down this almost dry wash and hidden among the sycamores, since at the sound of his shooting the crows had abandoned their home-building and flown straight away from there.

There was no more shooting; nevertheless, for five minutes Lee Purdy remained as he had fallen, motionless. Then, quite distinctly, he heard a man say: "Get over there, boy!" Followed the sound of a smart slap.

"He's come to the conclusion he's done his job," Lee

Purdy decided. "He's mounting his horse to ride away; he's slapping the horse on the flank to make him swing away from some obstacle to his mounting. Well, here goes for the altars of the Purdy family!"

He rose and ran to his automobile across the railroad tracks. Following the fashion of so many cattlemen whose business necessitates their motoring frequently over lonely mountain roads, across sage and mesquite-studded plains and through timber where panther, bear, wolf or coyote, the cow-man's constant irritant, are frequently met, Lee Purdy carried, strapped to his spare tire in front, a cavalry rifle scabbard in which an army rifle, cut down to a sporting weapon and always loaded, nestled ready to his hand. After obtaining this rifle he dropped prone behind the steel railroad track which, perched on the ties, rose some twelve inches above the level of the ground on which Lee Purdy lay; with care the hundred-and-twenty-pound rail would afford him perfect protection.

He listened. Presently, above the thrum of the telegraph wires, he heard a slight sound that would have passed unnoticed by one whose every nerve was not strained to listen. It was the blow of a steel-shod hoof against a boulder in the wash of the Rio Hondo, and the sound came from east of where the man had spoken.

"He didn't see me get up," Lee Purdy exulted. "He was busy picking his way through the wash. But he'll come up out of the sycamores presently and halt for one last backward look to make certain. A fine sight at five hundred yards ought to fix that scoundrel's clock."

He adjusted his sights and decided that luck was with him, in that he would not have to make an allowance for windage, which is inconvenient when doing fast snap shooting. Then he drew the bolt, quietly slid a cartridge into the breech and waited, quite calm in his belief that he could not possibly be deceived in his estimate of human nature. Surely the scoundrel must know that in all that desolate lonely land there was no human being closer than Arguello, sixteen miles east. That knowledge would make him careless—inspire him with confidence.

The head of a roan horse appeared above the low fringe of sage along the northern bank of the Rio Hondo. It rose higher, turning as it rose, and presently horse and rider came into plain view. And even as Lee Purdy had assumed, the rider pulled up his horse, quartering toward San Onofre, and looked back for the thing he had left lying at the foot of the loading chute. He did not see readily that which he sought, so he raised his hand above his eyes to shade them from the westering sun while he looked again. . . .

As he watched the man slide slowly out of the saddle and fall beside his horse, Lee Purdy murmured, "I think I made a bull's-eye, but I'll take a leaf out of your book, my sweet Christian friend. It's a sign of hard luck when one doesn't make certain that an important job has been perfectly done. As some wiseacre once remarked, 'Genius is a capacity for taking infinite pains.' I'll stroll over and read your brand and earmarks."

He did, advancing briskly, his rifle at the ready, his glance never faltering from the man who lay so

still beside the roan horse, now playfully nuzzling his late rider's body.

Purdy turned the man over on his back, and the two men gazed into each other's faces silently and thoughtfully. Then:

"I thought you'd come," said the wounded man, speaking with difficulty. "You were smart enough to fool me, so I figured if you were able to walk you'd do what I neglected to do—and that's make certain. Well, give me the mercy shot, as they say south of the Border."

Lee Purdy relieved the fallen man of a pistol in a shoulder holster under the latter's left arm. Next he opened the man's shirt and searched for the wound. He found it high up on the right side, with the point of exit under the right shoulder-blade. It had just missed the spine.

"I will be surprised if it develops that you broke any bones in your fall," he declared. "The horse stood fast enough and you slid off so slowly I would have fired again if I hadn't entertained so much respect for your horse. Why should anybody shoot a good honest horse?"

"Thanks. He *is* a good horse—an Irish hunter crossed with a Hermosillo range pony. Well?"

"I've drilled you through the right lung and made an extraordinarily clean job of it. I think you ought to get well. At any rate the chances are about even. Ever study the vagaries of the flight of a rifle bullet?"

"No."

Lee Purdy squatted on his heels and rolled another cigarette. "At short range—say up to two hundred

yards—the bullet, after leaving the muzzle, has a twisty motion imparted to it by the lands, or what you call the rifling in the barrel. This causes the bullet to wobble, describing a tiny orbit as it speeds ahead, and if it reaches its target while this wobble is on, the result is a great jagged wound. At longer ranges, however, after the bullet has settled in its flight, it will, unless it strikes a bone, drill a neat small hole from entrance to exit. At extreme ranges, after the force of the bullet has been spent, it will begin to wobble again; then, if it hits a man, it will tear him up a bit. I dropped you at five hundred yards and if you have any particular desire to live your desire should be granted. You appear to be a tough, stringy sort of person."

The would-be assassin's dark, fierce eyes glowed somberly. "Are you playing with me before finishing your job?" he demanded.

"Certainly not. I'm not going to do anything to hasten your death."

"Why not? I tried my best to kill you."

"Well, I have never killed a wounded, helpless enemy, and if that experience can be avoided I prefer to avoid it. Of course, I tried my best to kill you five minutes ago, but that was in self-defense. I had to stop you or risk having you do a better job the next time you tried."

"But," said the stranger with a curiously frank grin, "you say you are not going to stop me. You appear to want me to live. Why? So I'll be grateful and tell you who hired me?"

"No. I do not expect you to snitch. If you've sold

yourself, stay sold. Be an honest killer, if that's your trade, but don't be a double-crossing crook."

This frank expression of a code evoked a chuckle from the wounded man. A slight hemorrhage stifled the chuckle almost instantly. When he could get his breath he said:

"I see. You're saving me to get hung, eh? Well, there were no witnesses, so how are you going to prove I tried to murder you? You can't convict a man on uncorroborated testimony. My word is as good as yours."

"You are an unimaginative ass. I haven't the slightest interest in you since I failed to wound you mortally. I'm going to bring my automobile over here, tuck you into the tonneau and run you down to the railroad hospital at Arguello. Have you got any money?"

"About two hundred and fifty dollars, Mr. Purdy."

"Well, then, pay your own hospital bills while it lasts. If it isn't enough I'll make up the deficit, and if you're foolish enough to die I'll give you Christian burial and write home to your folks a first-class lie regarding your demise, if you care to give me your home address."

"I don't understand you, Mr. Purdy. How do you know I won't try to earn my fee after I get out of hospital?"

Lee Purdy smiled a quiet, prescient little smile. "Well, if you're dog enough to do that I suppose that's one of the chances I'll have to take. Well, don't die, old settler, until I can get back here with my auto."

"Take my horse," said the killer affably.

"Thanks." Lee Purdy swung into the saddle and

galloped back to San Onofre, where he turned the horse into the cattle corral, and drove back in the automobile for his now thoroughly mystified passenger. With considerable difficulty he managed to get the fellow into the tonneau and stretched him out on the rear seat, with his long legs dangling over the side. Then, in low gear, Purdy drove away, breaking trail through the sage to the main road. It was a rough ride at best, and the wounded man was grateful when Purdy halted his car in the shadow of the tiny station at San Onofre.

"Well, what's the next move?" he demanded of Purdy.

"The California Limited is due in about fifteen minutes. I'm going to flag it and send you, in the baggage car, to Arguello."

"A limited train will not stop on flag."

"This one will," said Lee Purdy confidently. "I'll straddle the tracks with my auto and pretend I'm stalled."

"My name's Bud Shannon," his chance acquaintance volunteered. "You're a good fellow and I'm beholden to you."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," Purdy said affably, and gave the wounded killer his hand. They stared at each other humorously. Then: "Any time you feel like giving up your present profession and tackling the hard, lonely life of a cow-hand, I'll give you seventy-five dollars a month, good board and the best lodging in New Mexico. I have a real bunk-house, not a kennel, and any foreman who can't make his men keep it clean can't be foreman."

"Mr. Purdy, I don't understand you a-tall."

"I'm not surprised. There are times, Bud, when I have difficulty understanding myself, and this is one of them. Want me to take your horse home with me and keep him until you're ready to fork him again?"

"By God, I don't understand you a-tall!" Bud Shannon repeated.

A plume of thin smoke showed over a low hill to the west. "Here comes the Limited," Purdy announced, and forthwith set his automobile astraddle of the tracks.

CHAPTER II

THE conductor, hurrying up the track, found the engineer and the fireman abusing Lee Purdy. They were casting thinly veiled aspersions upon his intelligence and impudence; to all of which Purdy paid not the slightest attention until the arrival of the conductor.

"Got a friend of mine here," he explained. "Shot accidentally. Take him into the baggage-car and drop him off at Arguello. Tell the station agent to see that he's sent to the railroad hospital and that Lee Purdy will guarantee the expenses."

"Whoa, boy," the conductor retorted. "You're a cool citizen of a mighty hot country, you are. I don't know Lee Purdy and the company doesn't trust him. Nobody rides on my train on any stranger's guarantee; so unless your friend has a valid pass, somebody will have to buy a ticket; otherwise I'll not attend the obsequies."

"I should have known there is no sentiment in a railroad company," Purdy retorted, and handed the conductor a dollar. The latter gravely made change, punched a receipt for a cash fare collected and handed it to Purdy, who tucked it in the killer's vest pocket. "Now, then," he suggested cheerfully, "let's go."

Bud Shannon was deposited on the floor of the baggage-car , but not until Lee Purdy had sacrificed a vil-

lainous old auto robe to furnish the desperado a pillow. As he prepared to leave the car he slapped the Shannon legs smartly and said, "Well, it might have turned out worse for both of us, Bud. Take care of yourself, old-timer. I'll see you at the railroad hospital at the earliest opportunity."

Shannon reached for his would-be victim's hand. "Mr. Purdy," he whispered, "if I knew your enemies in this country I'd tell you who they were. If I ever find out and provided I get over this, I'll kill 'em for you and it won't cost you nothing. Compliments of Bud Shannon."

"Well, so long, Bud. Pleasant green fields."

He stood on the station platform and watched the Limited wind swiftly away and lose itself among some low hills. Then he looked at his watch.

"Five o'clock," he soliloquized. "Guess I'll wash up and get out of here. I'm as bloody as a butcher." He went over into the corral and washed himself at the watering trough, combed his hair with his fingers and caught up Bud Shannon's horse. After loosening the sixty-pound stock saddle he fastened a long horsehair leading rope around the animal's neck and tethered the horse to the rear of his automobile.

"Well, old boy," he addressed the animal as he favored him with an affectionate rubbing under the jaws, "it's up to you to step ten or twelve miles an hour for an hour and a half."

Footsteps crossing the station platform caused him to whirl and leap behind the automobile; on the instant he drew the gun he had taken from Bud Shannon. Upon his word, San Onofre was coming to life today.

He crouched behind the automobile, fully conscious of the fact that while the tonneau was no protection from bullets, at least it furnished fair camouflage for the target. A minute passed; and then a very pleasant, cool voice addressed him.

"You may put up your pistol, Mr. Purdy, and come out from behind your automobile. I give you my word of honor I am unarmed, and if I were I wouldn't dream of shooting you."

"Anybody with you?" Purdy demanded.

"No."

"I hope you're telling the truth. I'm coming out, but if anybody shoots at me it would be well to get me through the head with the first shot. I'll come a-fogging and I'll get you, even if you are a woman."

"Wait! I'll come to you. You're much too suspicious for comfort."

"Fair enough. I'll wait."

Footsteps crunched the sand; presently before Lee Purdy stood a girl. He stared at her amazed for about five seconds; then thrust his pistol down between his shirt and the waist-band of his trousers. He bowed a Castilian bow—sweeping in its completeness.

"I'm sorry," he said. "This happens to be an off day for me. I suppose, however, one may be permitted at least a day a year to indulge himself in suspicion."

"You *are* a bit jumpy," the stranger assured him soberly. "However, I dare say your reasons are sound and sufficient."

He nodded. "You addressed me by name. May I remind you that I am desolated at my ignorance of your identity?"

"I am Miss Gail Ormsby of Los Angeles. Mr. Todd was to meet me here."

"Oh, so you dropped off the Limited here? I didn't see you alight."

The girl nodded. "You were otherwise engaged."

"And that engine crew abused me for flagging the train with my automobile, when all the time the greasy rascals knew the train was going to stop at San Onofre anyhow. So you were expecting Mr. Ira Todd to call for you here?"

The girl nodded again.

"Well, Miss Ormsby, he isn't going to keep his engagement. He drove in from his ranch to Arguello last night. I saw him there this morning and shortly after that he was taken ill."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! What is the matter with him?"

Lee Purdy hung his head and slowly scuffed a hole in the dirt with his boot toe. He admitted finally: "A worthy citizen of Arguello found it necessary to bend an iron bar over Mr. Ira Todd's head, Miss Ormsby. I think he fractured the Todd skull; at any rate, the last I saw of Ira Todd the pupils of his eyes had contracted to mere pin-points, and it is my personal although unprofessional opinion that Ira Todd has concussion of the brain."

"How perfectly dreadful!" Miss Ormsby's fine eyes and finer features puckered with horror. "What has been done to his assailant?"

"He has been congratulated by a number of solid citizens and cursed and threatened by other citizens not quite so solid."

"I do believe you are Ira Todd's assailant."

"Hot, hot, red-hot!" he replied lightly. "You're on my trail, Miss Ormsby; you'll tree me in a minute. However, you're just a *trifle* wrong. Ira Todd was my assailant. He went into a restaurant in Arguello and there in a loud voice made statements derogatory to my honor. I was breakfasting there at the time. Unfortunately for him, the restaurant happens to be owned and operated by a very good friend of mine, a Chinaman who drifted down into this country about five years ago suffering from tuberculosis. I found the poor devil hungry and broke in Arguello and without a friend, so I had him come out to my ranch and stick around until he got well. Then I loaned him five hundred dollars to get into business in Arguello. He has repaid the money but still feels indebted to me, so when the unfortunate Ira spoke out of his turn in Chan's presence and in Chan's restaurant, Chan just naturally busted him with a short iron slice-bar he uses to poke up the charcoal under his steak broiler. What makes you think I discommoded you by ruining Ira?"

"Because you're quite gory now and I saw you help put a wounded man aboard the train. Somebody said he had been shot and was dying."

"Maybe so," murmured Lee Purdy. "I fear the best but hope for the worst."

"You told the conductor he had been shot accidentally. Who shot you accidentally?" And she tapped her shoulder significantly.

Purdy laughed softly. "This is the most accidental country I ever knew, Miss Ormsby. However, I haven't been shot. Almost, but not quite. Where are you bound?"

"For the Box K Ranch."

"Oh! I never would have guessed it."

The gentle irony in his soft voice was not lost on the girl. She stared at him haughtily.

"This your first visit to our country, Miss Ormsby?"

"Yes."

"Did I understand you to say you were from Los Angeles?"

The girl nodded, without abating her cool scrutiny of him.

"I suppose," he resumed presently, "I'll have to be Ira Todd's attorney-in-fact and do for him and in his name, place and stead all of those things which he would or could do if personally present. That car of mine is sound and seaworthy, although it looks like original sin; there's room for you in the front seat and for all of your baggage in the tonneau. I'm a safe, sane, conservative driver, and I am at your service."

"I'm not so certain that I ought to accept your invitation, Mr. Purdy, although I thank you for it. I think you're a cool sort of desperado. I'm quite certain you and that wounded man have been shooting at each other because—because—well, when I saw that you hadn't noticed me sitting quietly on that bench yonder, I started toward you. And at the sound of my first footfall on this platform you turned like a flash and reached for the pistol in your waistband and hid behind this motorcar."

"The witness declines to answer any accusations upon the ground that he may incriminate himself." He glanced at his watch. "Five minutes after five," he announced, "and all members of the desperadoes' union,

knock off at five. Better take a chance and ride with me."

"Somebody else may call for me in Ira Todd's place."

"Scarcely probable, unless Ira issued instructions to that effect before my friend Chan stretched him. And even if somebody should call for you I wouldn't think of permitting you to go with him; no, that was a stupid way to express it—I mean I wouldn't think of permitting him to—ah—serve you. However, I'm certain no such regrettable contingency will arise."

"You are much too certain of yourself, Mr. Purdy. I shall *not* accompany you—at least, not willingly."

He appeared to accept her decision as final. "Then may I have the pleasure of freighting your baggage for you? Whoever calls here for you will arrive in a flivver, and flivvers and that wardrobe trunk of yours were never meant to be coupled in the betting. Still, if you think I might steal your trunk, you have my word that it will be quite safe if left on the platform. Very few white men are around here lately."

She repressed with difficulty a desire to laugh. "In that case it is scarcely kind to trouble you with my baggage."

"A lady's slightest whim is, to me, a command. I am bound for Arguello. If I do not meet anybody on the road coming to fetch you I'll engage somebody in Arguello with a car to do it. However, I have to proceed slowly, because I am going to lead this horse behind my car. I imagine it will be about three, perhaps four, hours before anybody comes for you, and San Onofre is a very lonely place after dark. The altitude

is about two thousand feet here and after the sun sets the nights are bitterly cold. Coyotes howl in the sage hereabouts and once in a while a lobo wolf drops around to see if anybody has left a sick steer in the loading corral. However, since you cannot trust me, of course——"

"Pick up the marbles, Mr. Purdy. You win," Miss Ormsby, of Los Angeles, interrupted, bravely enough but with a suspicious eagerness.

Lee Purdy bowed acknowledgment of her surrender.

CHAPTER III

THAT was a long and memorable drive to Arguello. The horse did not take kindly to being led behind an automobile, and it required very slow going at first to win the animal's confidence; he showed a disposition to be towed rather than led, and once, in his terror and bewilderment, he half turned and did a devil's tattoo with his heels on the rear of the tonneau.

"It's an awful thing to have been born cursed with an obliging disposition," Lee Purdy mourned. "Here you observe the spectacle of another man's horse kicking holes in my automobile."

"If he succeeds in kicking any paint off your automobile I'll send him a sack of oats," Miss Ormsby answered crisply. "Another dent or two cannot possibly make any difference."

Purdy nodded. "I do not yearn for new and shiny automobiles as I used to," he admitted. "This one has a good motor; it gets me where I want to go."

"Isn't this your horse then, Mr. Purdy?"

"No, it belongs to the wounded man you saw me put aboard the train."

"Who was that man?"

"I don't know. Never met him before."

"I had an idea he was a friend of yours. I heard you instruct the conductor to tell the station agent at Arguello to send the man to the railroad hospital and

that you would guarantee the bill." Purdy had no answer to that. "Well?" the girl persisted.

"Well, what?"

"I'm bursting with curiosity. Why did you guarantee the hospital bill of a total stranger and then take charge of his horse?"

"I didn't know what else to do. The man has a chance to recover and I couldn't very well leave him to die all alone out in the sage, could I? Besides, this horse looks good to me. Good saddle and bridle, too. If that man dies and nobody calls for his horse and outfit I suppose I may, with entire propriety, keep it. Moreover, I'm entitled to security for that hospital bill, am I not?"

"I prefer to think you have done all this because you are magnanimous—or sorry you shot that man."

"How do you know I shot him?"

"While you were fussing with that horse a little while ago I pulled your rifle half-way out of the scabbard and looked in the breech. There is an empty shell in it."

He turned toward her and favored her with a frank, appreciative smile, but made no verbal comment on her perspicacity. "How do you know you were looking at my rifle?" he parried.

"Because his is in the tonneau! His belt is there also, and I noticed two vacancies. So I suspect he shot at you twice. I suspect too that you took that pistol away from him, otherwise you would have a holster for it. It must be inconvenient to wear it inside the band of your trousers, like a professional killer."

"What do you know about professional killers?"

"They're all over Hollywood," she replied lightly. "You can't fool me on Wild West stuff. I have been raised too close to motion pictures. Out in my country we're fed up on it."

"I think I approve of you—quite," said Lee Purdy.

"I think I might be induced to approve of you if you were more communicative. Why did Ira Todd speak ill of you?"

"Well, you see, Miss Ormsby, Ira doesn't like me."

"What did you do to cause him to dislike you?"

"I wear these riding breeches and boots and a wrist watch and a necktie and I use a handkerchief. I suppose Ira Todd could put up with these weaknesses of mine, but I strain his good nature by brushing my teeth and bathing frequently between the spring and the fall round-ups. So Ira thinks I'm a dude and tells everybody I am."

The girl laughed, and her silvery cachinnation tinkled pleasantly on ears long since attuned to the heartier and less refined laughter of the local belles. "I wonder what you think of Ira Todd?" she ventured. But Lee Purdy was silent, and she told herself she liked him for that.

However, like the majority of her sex, Gail Ormsby was curious.

"Why did the owner of this horse shoot at you, Mr. Purdy?"

"I forgot to ask him the exact amount, Miss Ormsby, but I surmise he did it for a sum in the neighborhood of two hundred dollars. The market price for removing objectionable persons, according to the last quotation I had, is two hundred dollars."

"And the man was not your enemy? He tried to kill you to earn a fee?" Horror and incredulity were expressed in her face and voice.

"I have his word for it, Miss Ormsby; I know of no reason why he should lie about it. I didn't ask him about his business. His admission was quite voluntary."

"How perfectly atrocious! Why, I thought the Wild West survived only in Hollywood!"

"There is no Wild West, and I doubt very much if the West was ever much wilder than the East. I can engage a gangster in New York or Chicago to remove an objectionable person for a sum as low as fifty dollars. Out here, however, our professional killers have some professional pride. They believe that the laborer is worthy of his hire and they will *not* work for scab wages. I honor them for it."

She glanced at him quickly, but his face was solemn to the point of sadness. "You appear to regard this attempt upon your life as a very trifling affair, Mr. Purdy," she pursued.

He nodded. "Life is a very trifling affair, Miss Ormsby. Some years back I learned how not to take it seriously. My life is quite heavily insured, and I'm much more valuable dressed than on the hoof."

"Are you a fatalist?"

"Oh, no, indeed! A fatalist is one who believes that what will happen will happen, whereas I know from experience that what will happen may be indefinitely delayed if one exercises a little horse-sense."

"You must have an implacable enemy in this country, Mr. Purdy."

"Your Mr. Ira Todd is the only man here who evinces an active dislike of me. However, Todd didn't hire that killer."

"I'm sure he didn't. Really, Mr. Purdy, he wouldn't."

"Of course he wouldn't!" Purdy's voice carried a razor edge of sarcasm.

"I'm glad to hear you say so positively that he did not hire that loathsome reptile. Do you know who did?"

"I do not, Miss Ormsby."

"Why does Ira Todd dislike you, Mr. Purdy? Please tell me the real reason."

Lee Purdy's grave face lighted with a grim smile. "Oh," he answered lightly, "Ira doesn't dislike me half as much as he does my idea of dress, and the fact that while I am of this country, nevertheless I am an alien. Remember what old What's-his-name said: 'We hate people because we do not know them, and we do not know them because we hate them.'"

"Do you dislike Ira Todd?"

"Certainly. I dislike him exceedingly. Do you like him, Miss Ormsby?"

"I have never met Ira Todd," she answered.

"Well, when you do you'll like him. Todd is a fairly presentable chap. He's a good cow-man and a good ranch manager of the old school; he has a host of friends in this country, and once he served a term as sheriff, cleaned up the office and ran some twenty undesirable characters off to greener pastures. He is good-looking and courageous."

"Then why do you dislike him exceedingly?"

"Must I answer that question?" he rebuked her gently.

"Sorry!" she answered. "I didn't mean to be nosey."

"Todd's is not a negative character," he went on, ignoring her apology. "I told you he had a host of friends. It is to his credit that he has, also, a host of enemies."

The girl smiled. She mistrusted this man exceedingly, for all his apparent good breeding. He was too cool, quite too sure of himself, too commanding. Nevertheless, he had a way with him—a way of facing facts and issues.

"I think," she said presently, "that eventually you and Mr. Todd will grow to be good friends."

"I'm glad you're beginning to like me," he replied gratefully.

She bit her lip. She could have pinched him for that speech. She cast about in her mind for something to say to that—something that would put him in his place; but before she could wither him the golden moment for doing so had passed. Perhaps, too, it would be just as well to ignore him. In a sense she was his guest. He had rescued her from a terrible predicament and if he chose to trade on her sense of obligation to him . . .

At a distance there came to the girl the faint hum of an airplane motor. Simultaneously she and Purdy glanced skyward.

"Mail plane or army?" Miss Ormsby queried.

"Neither. It's mine. I recognize the purr of my own bus."

He stopped the car, got out and stood in the trail,

waving a white handkerchief. The plane circled lower and lower until it was not more than five hundred yards overhead, when apparently the aviator recognized Purdy, for at once he commenced opening and closing his muffler in a most inexplicable manner. Purdy stood with bent head listening until the aviator ceased his peculiar actions; then the girl saw her strange host wave both arms skyward in a gesture that even she knew meant "Very well, I understand."

Immediately the airplane zoomed upward and disappeared into the northeast. Purdy climbed back into his car and resumed their journey. He drove in silence for ten miles; then, suddenly aware of his lack of companionship, he turned to Gail Ormsby.

"That was my mechanician. He had a message for me, so he flew over and gave it to me in the international code—opening and closing his muffler. Just dots and dashes, Miss Ormsby, and if nobody is hurrying one, one can make them with a motor or a telegraph instrument."

"We are not very far from the Mexican Border, are we, Mr. Purdy?"

"About an hour by airplane."

"I know now what you are," she challenged. "You're a bootlegger—operating with automobile and airplane, and running contraband liquor across the Border."

"Well, it will not be necessary to tell the world about it, Miss Ormsby."

"I'll not. Nevertheless, Mr. Purdy, it does seem a great pity that a man of your obvious good breeding and education should stoop to that illicit traffic, with

its shootings and killings, its dodging and hiding, its bribery and corruption. There are so many other ways for an intelligent man to make money."

He laughed softly. "It's so many long years since I've been lectured about my morals," he declared. "Please go on. I like it."

She flushed at his raillery. "Do you fly airplanes, too? You said that was your own bus."

"Oh, yes, I fly them!"

"I dare say you learned during the war."

"Right you are."

"Were you an enlisted man or an officer?"

"I was an officer. In fact, I am an officer still. I'm a major of aviation in the Officers' Reserve Corps."

"You are presumed to be a gentleman, too, aren't you, Major Purdy?"

"Please," he pleaded, "do not be too hard on me."

"I cannot understand the character of a man who will risk his life to serve his country in war but who in time of peace risks his life with equal carelessness to break his country's laws and make a few dirty dollars in poisonous whisky."

"I can understand such fellows very well, Miss Ormsby."

"Do you mean to tell me you defend your actions?"

"Indeed, I do. You see, I'm not a bootlegger."

"Then why didn't you say so in the first place? You led me to believe——"

"I didn't do anything of the sort. Nobody has to lead you to believe anything. You are very observant and deductive—so you jump to conclusions."

"But you permitted me to lecture you——"

"I liked it. If you hadn't been interested in me you wouldn't have lectured me."

She flushed and her eyes sparkled dangerously. She disliked being drawn into traps and having fun poked at her by total strangers. "Well, what *is* your business?" she demanded.

"I'm a cattleman, Miss Ormsby."

"You are the first cattleman I have ever seen who wore park riding boots, English riding breeches and tailor-made shirts. Do you herd your cows from an airplane?"

"Please do not be provoked, Miss Ormsby. I'm an alien in this country and I fly around it in an airplane a great deal for the reason that I like to keep in practice, it saves me much valuable time, I avoid traveling rough, uncared-for roads and I like to give the natives of the country something to talk about, something to look forward to. They expect to see me crash and perish one day, and when that happens they'll say, 'Serves the durned fool right. Why didn't he stick to hosses?' "

The girl sighed. "I think you're a most unusual person," she admitted reluctantly.

"And you're glad I'm not a bootlegger?"

"I would be glad to be certain nobody is a bootlegger."

"I would have preferred a more definite reply, but never mind."

"Have you ever crashed?"

"A couple of times."

"Get hurt?"

"Roughed up a little once."

"But you must find it quite expensive maintaining and repairing an airplane."

"Not at all. I have half a dozen ships at my ranch. When one is out of business, I fly another."

"Indeed!"

"They were supposed to be fighting planes in nineteen seventeen, but they were demoded in nineteen nineteen, so I bought six of them from the government for two hundred and fifty dollars each. I have six spare four-cylinder motors that cost me a hundred and fifty dollars each, so I expect to fly for quite a few years. A hundred miles an hour is fast enough when nobody is pursuing one. I attract considerable attention and criticism flying around this country. It is said that I frighten the cows and their milk turns sour."

"Do you ever fly over the Box K Ranch?"

"Very frequently. There is an alfalfa field just below the ranch-house. It is excellent landing ground and my plane doesn't hurt the alfalfa; but Ira Todd thinks it does, so I cannot land there any more and that is an inconvenience. You see, I am the volunteer aerial patrol over the Cuyamaca National Forest."

"Why, I thought our national forests were patrolled by the air forces of the United States Army, Major."

"They used to be, but this year the United States Army Air Force is short of gasoline and lubricating oil. Congress is in a parsimonious mood except in the purchase of votes. Five billion dollars' worth of our navy is rusting to disuse because we cannot afford men to care for the ships, and the last stand of public timber in our country may risk loss by fire in order that we may save a few thousand dollars' worth of gaso-

line. Our so-called economy has so crippled the air forces that we haven't flyers enough to go around. They are needed at flying fields to act as instructors. Consequently, I've taken over the Cuyamaca patrol myself."

"You amazing man! Who pays for your oil and gasoline?"

"Oh, I pay for it myself when I have to! Last year the cattlemen who have grazing permits in the forest reserve donated about two thousand dollars to the cause, but this year the cattlemen are in a bad, bad way financially, so I'm not asking them for a donation which they cannot afford."

"Do you make a daily patrol?"

"Good gracious, no! I am much too busy a man. I do try very hard, however, to get around three times a week. The forest ranger service is always on the job, it is tremendously efficient and tremendously loyal, and between them and me we've been pretty lucky. Haven't had a sizable fire in three years, although we would have had eight if I hadn't discovered them in embryo while on patrol and given the rangers prompt warning."

"How do you warn them?"

"I circle low over the ranger station and honk my horn until I attract the attention of the ranger; then I drop him a message. He warns the other stations by telephone. It's a heap of fun."

"I think it's a heap of work—hard, expensive, dangerous work."

"Well, you don't mind that after you get interested in the forest ranger service, Miss Ormsby. There is

one department of the federal service where there is a minimum of graft, politics and self-seeking; it's a hard and lonely life and only a certain type of man will stand it. It is, however, the only life such men can live happily. They are interested in nothing except trees and animal life—nature-lovers, every one of them. They are underpaid, unappreciated, unknown; their world is the Forest Reserve area they are told off to guard. Soldiers die in battle. So do forest rangers, and when they do they die harder and more dreadful deaths than soldiers. Had a good friend of mine burned to death last year. His widow is the lookout on San Buenaventura. Spends her young life ten miles from human society, looking after a baby and a telescope."

"And you enjoy playing the game with the forest ranger service, even to the extent of paying a high price to participate?"

"Oh, I'm not exactly a philanthropist, Miss Ormsby! I hold a distinctly worth-while grazing permit in the Cuyamaca. It is my summer range for five thousand cattle. My winter range, farther down, contains a hundred thousand acres of fair grazing land. Seven thousand acres of it lie in the upper end of the valley of the main Rio Hondo, and that's where I cut my wild hay. Of course a fire in the Cuyamaca Reserve can spread to my winter range and burn up all the hay I cut and stack during the summer to tide me over a hard winter. I hate to have a starving cow ask me for hay and be told to help herself to sage-brush—all because the hay has been burned in a fire started by some ignorant, careless, lazy, unappreciative hunter or camper

who neglects to put out his camp-fire," he told her.

"That must be, indeed, a sad experience."

"Cows are so forlorn and forgiving when they're starving that it makes the experience all the sadder," he went on. "I tell you, Miss Ormsby, when a simple, confiding old cow puts all of her faith and trust in you and you go back on her, you feel mighty mean about it."

"The Box K Ranch runs cattle in the Cuyamaca," the girl informed him.

"A few hundred head," he replied indifferently.

They topped a long high hill; afar the cluster of lights that marked Arguello shone through the darkness. "We leave El Valle de los Ojos Negros here," Purdy announced.

"What does that mean?"

"It means the valley of the black eyes."

"How queer! What is the name symbolic of?"

"There are half a dozen little shallow lakes in the upper end of that valley. They are invaluable as drinking places for cattle. Viewed from the hills late in the day, two of these lakes nestling in that valley look like two dark eyes set in a vast and ugly human face. Then, too, many men have quarreled over that water and black eyes have frequently resulted. So the Mexicans hereabouts have coined for the valley the title of El Valle de los Ojos Negros." He leaned toward her anxiously. "I hope you're not afraid to make this journey with me, Miss Ormsby."

"No, I'm not afraid of you, Major Purdy. I made up my mind to that back at San Onofre. I had to trust you then, so I decided to trust you all the way."

"Thank you. You will not have reason to regret that decision, I'm sure. Well, here we are at the thriving metropolis of Arguello."

They crossed a long wooden bridge over an arroyo and were in the main street. Purdy drew in at the sidewalk before a false-fronted frame building, dimly visible in the light from a pool hall across the street.

"Chan has closed up early," he remarked as he looked into the unlighted windows. "Hello! The door is open. Dare say he's just put out the lights. Well, I'll rout him out and he'll fix us a snack in a pig's whisper."

He alighted from the car and stepped into the dark and deserted little restaurant. "Chan Hock!" he called repeatedly, but receiving no reply he came back to his car, procured an electric torch and returned to the restaurant. After a few minutes spent in a more thorough investigation Gail Ormsby saw him emerge again and cross the street to the pool hall. In a few minutes he returned and climbed behind the wheel again.

"Ira Todd's friends have wrecked Chan's restaurant and put him out of business completely," he announced. "The place is a riot of broken crockery, chairs, tables and kitchen utensils, but a Mexican swamper over in the pool hall informs me that the Chink made his escape."

He glided off down the street, but before he had proceeded half a block he jammed down his brakes. In the light of his headlights the girl saw, standing at the curb, a battered, weather-beaten light farm wagon, with two mules attached.

"That's my chuck wagon!" Purdy exclaimed. "The attack on the restaurant took place about five o'clock

this afternoon. My cook, driving the chuck wagon, should have reached Arguello about that hour, en route home. I told him to stop at Chan's restaurant for supper—too much trouble to outspan on the road and cook it himself. Now, he had two led horses when he started. Where are they?"

"Why spend your time wondering? Didn't you guess where I came from?" Gail Ormsby suggested pointedly.

"Right you are. Pardon me while I go into a small trance and consult my ectoplasm." He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth and howled softly, like a hungry, lonely dog, the while his long brown hands fanned the night air in a manner akin to the manual protestations of a pawnbroker.

"I see a light," he murmured. "It grows brighter. I see a hungry Mexican cook sitting in a restaurant presided over by a temperamental Chinaman. The Mexican and the Chinaman are friends. The Chinaman even so far offends against public morals and good taste, as to address the Mexican cook in terrible Spanish. Suddenly a mob composed of friends of Ira Todd's and the usual number of men who delight to be present at an outrage, provided hardier spirits attend to the dirty work, starts across the street from yonder pool hall. The leader is carrying a rope. The Mexican promptly leaves the restaurant, and the Chinaman, realizing that discretion is the better part of valor, harkens to the words of wisdom which the Mexican tosses over his shoulder as he departs.

"Hastily locking the front door, the Chinaman departs via the back door and runs around the block,

where he is met by the Mexican, who is mounted on one of the best, fastest and toughest cow-horses in New Mexico, and leading another. With a prayer of gratitude to his heathen gods, the Chinaman mounts and the friends go away from there in a very great hurry. While nobody in Arguello is desirous of lynching the Mexican, nevertheless the said Mexican realizes that, having in a moment of impulsiveness promised the Chinaman a horse and made good on that promise, he is going to be decidedly unpopular if he remains in Arguello to face the disappointed mob. He realizes, too, that he is but a lowly Mexican ranch cook whom nobody loves, but the Chinaman is a friend of his boss, and therefore it is up to him to do exactly what his boss would do under the same circumstances.

"Why, then, remain in Arguello to defend his actions against superior numbers? There exists but one reason. This chuck wagon and equipment, these mules were all entrusted to his keeping. He is responsible for them. He dare not abandon them. But, no, señor! *Caramba,* no! Señor Purdy will pass within the hour. He will stop at the restaurant for his supper. He will observe the outfit standing at the side of Main Street, and he will institute an investigation and discover things. Forthwith he will engage some worthy citizen to take up the uncompleted labors of his servant, Joaquin José Ramon Oreña y Sanchez, and see to it that the outfit reaches the ranch safely. And, having wotted the which, Joaquin José Ramon and his friend from China faded away into the hills."

Purdy ceased flapping his hands and sat up with a little cry of fright and surprise. "Have I been talking

wildly, Miss Ormsby?" he demanded anxiously "I think I've been in a trance or something."

"The reputations of the seers of this world are safe in your hands, Mr. Purdy. In our own quaint American patois, you said a mouthful. Now, when and where do we eat?"

"I do not know," Purdy answered cheerfully, "but the ravens fed Elijah, and inasmuch as I think I have more brains than a raven, you just hold the thought that I'll feed you." He swung his car in back of the chuck wagon and got out. The girl saw him rummaging around in the bed of the wagon and flashing his electric torch among a number of bundles and boxes there. Presently he returned to her carrying a gunny-sack half full of something and he put it in the tonneau.

"The citizens of Arguello and surrounding territory may riot, threaten, destroy property and lynch folks, but they have one great, triumphant virtue," he announced. "They are honest. Nobody ever sinks so low as to steal things from one's automobile or chuck wagon. I suspected that Joaquin José Ramon Oreña y Sanchez might have some grub left in the chuck box, and sure enough he had. Now, if you will sit here quietly until I can find a Mexican who will engage to drive this outfit home, I'll be your debtor. I'll not be gone very long."

He returned in about fifteen minutes with a Mexican, who tethered Bud Shannon's horse to the tail of the chuck wagon, climbed on the seat and drove away. "And now," said Lee Purdy cheerfully as he started his motor, "we will vamose."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that, it being no longer necessary to set our pace to conform to that of my unfortunate friend's horse, we will make tracks for the Enchanted Hill."

"And what, pray, may the Enchanted Hill be?"

"That is the seat of the Purdy family, Miss Ormsby. I'm the only Purdy who has ever sat on it. All the other Purdys but one think it is the most gosh-awful seat in the world, but it's beautiful to me and I love it; and that, I dare say, is sufficient excuse for the streak of sentiment which prompted me to call it the Enchanted Hill."

"How poetic you are, Mr. Purdy!"

"Not at all. My little sister coined that name for our ranch home. She lives with me at La Cuesta Encantada."

"Indeed!"

"Quite so. And just as a sop to your natural feminine curiosity I will admit now that there is not, nor has there ever been, any Mrs. Lee Purdy."

Gail Ormsby chuckled at his astuteness and joyous frankness.

"So your sister keeps house for you? How nice!"

"Yes, she's queen of the castle. She isn't very well."

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

"Tuberculosis," he explained. "She's just twenty years old and she's been ill two years. But she's getting better on the Enchanted Hill. I'm going to make a hand out of Hallie yet, if she doesn't die of loneliness."

"And you are taking me to the Enchanted Hill to-night, Mr. Purdy?"

"Such is my pious intention, Miss Ormsby."

"But what will your sister think when you bring home to her a strange girl you've picked up on the road?"

"She'll think I'm a very thoughtful brother to bring such a nice present home for her. She'll make you very welcome."

"You are very kind and hospitable, Mr. Purdy, but you forget I have my own ranch to go to!"

He snapped his fingers petulantly. "Confound it! I forgot all about that, Miss Ormsby. Well, you can stay with us a couple of days, can you not? I'd be obliged to you if you could see your way clear to do that. Hallie will enjoy you so—and so will I. By the way, here's the railroad hospital. Shall we drop in and see if we have enough corpses for a mess? Mr. Ira Todd was headed this way the last I saw of him."

"Let's," she agreed, and they paused before a white-painted, two-story frame building, with a veranda around it and a lawn and shrubbery in front. The nurse on duty met them in the hall and was presented to Gail Ormsby.

"Well, watchman," Lee Purdy queried, "what of the night?"

"Eight o'clock and all's well, Mr. Purdy."

"Is a perverse fate still withholding Ira Todd from his natural habitat, yon grass-grown cemetery?"

"Mr. Todd will recover in a day or two, we think. He sustained a slight fracture of the skull, but fortunately it is not a basal fracture."

"Lucky Mr. Todd! By the way, I sent another patient here—one Bud Shannon. How fares that punctured *hombre*?"

"Unless traumatic pneumonia should develop he has a fighting chance for recovery."

"Thank you," said Lee Purdy, and turned disconsolately toward his traveling companion. "There are days," he complained, "when a fellow cannot win a single bet." Then to the night nurse, "Good night." He drenched her with his bright and whimsical smile and departed with his unwilling guest.

About two miles out of Arguello Lee Purdy ran his car down on a sandy bar of the Rio Hondo and stopped. "Here's where we eat," he explained, and in a few minutes he had a camp-fire crackling between two flat rocks. He used another rock for a kitchen table and cut two large steaks from a sirloin roast purloined from Joaquin José Ramon's grub box. From a canteen he poured water for coffee and set his coffee-pot on the coals. Next he set out two tin cups, a salt-and-pepper shaker, a loaf of bread and a paper bag containing brown sugar.

"You might slice the bread while I barbecue these steaks," he suggested, and while the girl obeyed he cut and stripped of its bark a green willow fork. He sharpened the ends of the fork and hardened and dried them for a few minutes over the fire, after which he hung the steaks between them, dusted them liberally with salt and pepper and held them over a bed of glowing coals. By the time the steaks had been barbecued the coffee was at the boil; and with a huge beefsteak sandwich in one hand and a tin cup of excel-

lent coffee in the other the pair sat on the running-board of Lee Purdy's car and supped.

"Did the ravens furnish Elijah with paper napkins?" she ventured to inquire demurely as the last of the meal disappeared between her gravy-stained lips.

"No, indeed. Elijah was a practical prophet and licked his chops and fingers. However, I think we may avoid that." He handed her a roll of clean white waste, a supply of which he kept in one of the seat pockets for wiping his hands after working on the motor.

The girl sighed with contentment and pleasure, and in the glow of the headlights he warmed to the bright and friendly face she raised to him. "I do so enjoy picnics," she declared, "and this one was thoroughly enjoyable."

They proceeded on their journey. About ten o'clock the car climbed a long grade and came to a halt under a porte-cochère before a low white adobe house that gleamed in the starlight. A noisy pack of foxhounds and field dogs, with a few Airedale terriers and two comical little Scotties, leaped up on the running-board to welcome their master to the seat of the Purdy family; a beamish Mexican woman opened the door and stood there, silhouetted in the light that streamed from within. Purdy flung her a quick, anxious query in Spanish and received one brief and casual in reply. He nodded with satisfaction and turned to assist Gail.

"We'll leave your trunk right here in the car for tonight," he explained. "Conchita will bring your hand-bag to your room."

He bowed to her. "You are welcome to La Cuesta Encantada, Miss Ormsby. As my Gaelic Hieland ancestors would have it, *Caidi mlle faltaha*—ten thousand welcomes."

"I think you're quite the nicest desperado I have ever met." The girl beamed upon him with frank, ingenuous approval. "My lot has now fallen in a very pleasant place indeed."

From the veranda she stepped into a large living-room. The adobe walls had been plastered and calcimined, then painted in old ivory. The furniture was old Spanish and large bright Navajo rugs covered the floor, with a tremendous brown Kadiak bearskin rug in front of an open fireplace large enough to roast a yearling calf. A log fire crackled and threw shadows into the subdued light cast by a reading lamp; on the mantel were numerous pieces of Pueblo Indian pottery; half a dozen well done landscapes challenged the bareness of the walls and in one corner Gail Ormsby observed a baby grand piano.

"You must be chilled after that long night ride," Purdy suggested. "I am." He took possession of her coat and hat and laid them on a chair. "Now, while you're enjoying that fire I'll go get Hallie."

"Not necessary, Lee. Here I am," a languid voice spoke from the doorway. "I was just about to retire when I heard you come in."

Gail Ormsby turned to face a frail girl whose white face almost gleamed in the dim light. She was gazing at Gail, surprised, with a welcome and a query combined in the glance.

Purdy stepped to her side, placed his arm around

her waist and half drew her, half led her to Gail. "This is my little sister, Miss Hallie Purdy," he said. "Hallie, this is Miss Gail Ormsby, of Los Angeles."

Hallie offered a thin little hand and a glad smile. "I found Miss Ormsby at San Onofre," her brother explained. "She got off the Overland there, en route to the Box K Ranch. For some reason nobody met her there, so I brought her home with me."

"And you did exactly right—as usual," said Hallie, and presented her cheek as her brother stooped to kiss it. Her large dark eyes, very bright, beamed upon him a profound affection. "I've been very, very well since you left, darling," she replied to an unspoken query. "Please sit on the divan before the fire, Miss Ormsby. Lee, what has happened to you? There is blood on your shoulder and a hole in your coat."

"Got pecked by a cow," he fibbed readily. "Reached for me over the edge of the loading chute and scraped me a trifle. Any news?"

"None except over the radio, dear. Did you call for the mail at Arguello?"

Her brother slapped his thigh in huge disgust. "Forgot all about it, Hallie. Don't know what's the matter with me lately. I think I have an Edam cheese for a head."

Hallie patted his hand forgivingly and turned to their guest. "We would be quite lonely here were it not for the radio," she explained. "People who dwell in cities regard the radio as a pleasing fad, but when one's closest neighbor is twenty miles distant the radio is a blessing. Before we got the radio we had to depend entirely upon wireless. Lee became an expert

operator during the war, so he installed a receiving set here, and after dinner he used to listen in. Sometimes we caught interesting world news."

"You appear to have exercised considerable discrimination in your selection of a brother," said Gail.

"Most people appreciate Lee. Don't they, darling?"

"Don't make me blush, Hallie."

Gail sat between them on the divan, while she and Purdy basked gratefully in the glow of the burning logs. The conversation turned to a discussion of the country, the life of the Purdys, cattle conditions. Purdy realized, however, that his guest was very weary, so in about ten minutes he glanced at his watch saying, "Hallie, I think we might show Miss Ormsby to her room and then go to bed ourselves. You're up extraordinarily late, and you know that's against orders."

He picked Hallie up in his arms and carried her out of the room, down a hall and out to a rear veranda, which opened on a patio enclosed on two sides by an angle formed by two wings of the house and on the other two sides by an adobe wall. The still night was heavy with the fragrance of flowers, and Gail could hear a fountain splashing softly out in the midst of that fragrance. Along the veranda they proceeded; at the door of a guest chamber Purdy set his sister on her feet and turned to Gail Ormsby, who followed.

"Here is your room, Miss Ormsby. Hallie's nurse lives on your right and Hallie lives on your left, while I hole up across the patio. Good night. Hallie, after you've said good night to Miss Ormsby see that you go straight to bed." He kissed her and disappeared down the shadow of the veranda.

CHAPTER IV

THE first shafts of dawn light, escaping over the mountains to the east, descended into Lee Purdy's patio and thence into Gail Ormsby's room, awakening her. For several minutes she lay in that pleasant state of mental and physical detachment which succeeds a night of perfect rest and precedes the direful necessity of arising to face another day of existence.

Presently she was aware of stealthy footsteps passing along the veranda; then she heard a soft rap, three times repeated, on a door, and a voice said guardedly:

"Señor!"

Purdy's voice answered sharply in Spanish: "*Quién es?*"

"Ramon, señor."

"*Entra*, Ramon." A silence, save for the closing of a door. Then: "Hello, Chan, you crazy Chinaman! I've been expecting you two. I found your place in Arguello looking like a mad elephant had been through it. And I found the chuck wagon intact, Ramon. Jesus Ortega is driving it back to the ranch. Sit down, Chan, and tell me all about it. Speak softly," he added, lowering his own voice.

Thereafter for a few minutes Gail could barely hear the subdued murmur of their talk, then Lee Purdy's voice rose clear and commanding:

"They will, will they? Like hell, they will! Ramon,

tell Tommy Scaife to come here immediately. Then you and Chan arm yourselves. Don't worry, Chan. There's only one man on La Cuesta Encantada who owns the lynching concession, and that's Lee Purdy. They've treed the wrong varmint." There was a harsh note of anger, of impatience in his tones, but he conquered his displeasure and again his voice died away to an indistinguishable murmur, followed by footsteps that padded swiftly along the veranda and apparently out through a gate in the rear wall.

Gail Ormsby dressed hurriedly; then she too crept quietly along the veranda, through the hall and out onto the porte-cochère. Lee Purdy's automobile, with her trunk in the tonneau, still stood there, and on the front veranda her host stood with a pair of field-glasses to his eyes, gazing down into a world that seemed to swim far below them in an amethyst haze.

And now the girl realized why the Purdys had named their home La Cuesta Encantada. It was perched on the crest of a hill perhaps two thousand feet above the surrounding country. To the southeast and sweeping in a vast arc to the northwest lay a vast plain, a semi-desert, in which the night shadows still lingered; from this rapidly lifting shadow a white streak that was the road to Arguello came out of the foreground, while far across the plain the dawn light was painting with crimson and gold the crests of the mountains that hemmed in El Valle de los Ojos Negros and were first to receive the caress of the new day. Gail Ormsby had seen El Valle de los Ojos Negros in mid-afternoon and knew it for a harsh, unlovely and lonely land, but now it had been touched by a magical beauty. The linger-

ing night shadows and the dawn mist mercifully hid the crass reality of it; it seemed unreal, phantasmagoric, beautiful with a frail and gossamer beauty.

To the north and northeast the hills were blurred with timber, back of which rose three jagged peaks, snow-covered, crimson as blood with the upflung rays of a sun that was not yet in sight. Up from the lowlands, that magnificent empire, came the aroma of dawn, the incense released when dewdrops disappear in vapor and flowers and scented shrubs awaken and inhale the light of life. From afar on the Enchanted Hill cock quails called their families forth to their faring; a coyote saluted the sun with a final shrill cheer and a Shamo Indian thrush, the Caruso of birds, stirred in his cage under the porte-cochère and burbled and trilled his joyous matin. Seemingly he too realized, with Gail Ormsby, that here indeed was the Enchanted Hill.

Lee Purdy lowered his glasses and for the first time observed his guest. "Good morning, Miss Ormsby," he saluted her. "I'm glad you are up in time to catch the motif that inspired Hallie to call our home La Cuesta Encantada." He swept his arm in a wide circle. "You'll travel far before your heart will thrill again to beauty such as that. And I own it! I own everything to the tops of those mountains yonder and up to the forest reserve. I'm land-poor and financially harassed, but—I own that, and I love it and I'm happy. Let others thumb their greasy ledgers and clip their coupons and inhale the fumes of gasoline in cramped towns, but I will none of it. I like fresh air and to rise in the morning and look at my empire."

"I understand, Mr. Purdy. But do you usually look at it through field-glasses? I find my poor eyes quite sufficient for the assimilation of this beauty."

He glanced at her suspiciously.

"Your conference with Ramon and the Chinaman awakened me," she explained. "Is a mob from Arguello coming to lynch Chan?"

He nodded. "They're down in the valley now—six automobiles loaded with some human beings who think they're men. But they're not going to lynch Chan."

"How do you know they are not?" she demanded.

The little whimsical smile she had observed the day before and liked so much went questing over his face.

"This is my castle and I'm King of it," he replied. "And I know how to be King of a castle."

Lee Purdy thoughtfully replaced his field-glasses in their leather case; with the buckling down of the lid one would have thought that the drama that impended was already a closed incident. With an encompassing wave of his hand toward the horizon, he said, "Well, that is New Mexico."

"One should never weary of that view, Mr. Purdy."

"I know one who does not. That scene below always soothes me when I am not particularly happy."

"You are not of the Southwest," Gail challenged suddenly.

"No, I am not."

A silence. Why did he not tell her the name of the land he had been reared in? "Your choice of words and the manner of their pronunciation are slightly foreign——"

"I am not an English remittance man," he interrupted.

"I didn't say you were."

"You thought it, which is quite as uncomplimentary. I came out here to please myself, not my family, and I pay as I go—with my own money. I'm a Yankee."

"Oh! Boston!"

"Yes—complicated with Worcester, Massachusetts, and the inherited linguistic and literary traditions of the Purdy tribe—Longfellow, Emerson, William Dean Howells and the Boston Transcript."

Her silvery laugh tinkled pleasantly upon his ears once more. "And with six automobiles approaching, loaded with men intent upon lynching a Chinaman who is at once a friend and a guest of yours, you haven't found sufficient provocation to swear! Aren't you going to take some measures to make good on your statement of a few moments ago that there isn't going to be any lynching?"

"I'm not worried about those boys, Miss Ormsby. I wouldn't spoil this frolic for anything. I'm going to enjoy it."

"But a mob is a very dangerous thing, Mr. Purdy."

"Only for people who persist in believing that myth, Miss Ormsby. A mob without capable leadership is like an army that attacks without a purposeful plan. Let us not disturb ourselves over the gentlemen from Arguello. When they arrive they will be taken care of nicely. Meanwhile we're up unusually early and it will be an hour before breakfast is ready in the house, although the ranch cook will be serving a few hands in about ten minutes. Would you care to walk

up to the mess hall and have a cup of coffee now?"

"Thanks, no. I'm much too nervous to think of drinking coffee now."

"I'm not."

"Where is your Chinese friend?"

"In his natural element—the ranch kitchen—chattering pleasantly with Joaquin, my cook. I suggest that the best place to see this show is the place where the principal performer is to be found. We have nothing but scenery here."

"Very well, I'll go," the girl answered tremulously. "Do you think there'll be any bloodshed?"

"I don't know. I hope not. If there should be, it will not be any of ours. I view the shedding of my blood with the same horror that you would view the shedding of your hair."

They walked around the house and along a path lined with ragged robins, winding through a grove of scattered oaks. Under one of these about two hundred yards from the ranch-house stood a low frame building —a combination kitchen and mess hall. At a little distance was the bunk-house. A small Chinaman about thirty years of age stood at the screen door and held it open to admit Purdy and the girl. His slant eyes were solemn and anxious, but he said nothing. Gail glanced down the long table and saw places set for twenty-five.

"I had no idea you employed so many men, Mr. Purdy."

"I do not. Ten men is my limit, even in the busy season. Those places are set for our guests who are so shortly to arrive."

Gail Ormsby stared at her host, amazed. "Do you

mean to tell me you are going to give those beasts breakfast?"

"Certainly. It's the custom in this country. One feeds everybody arriving at meal-time, and without questioning his age, color, creed or previous condition of servitude. Are you quite sure you'll not have a cup of coffee?"

She shook her head, so Purdy accepted a cup of coffee which Chan brought at his request. He sipped it with evident enjoyment and was about to order another when Joaquin called from the kitchen that the guests had arrived. Instantly Purdy rose and opened a door which led into another room at the side of the hall.

"This is the commissary," he explained. "You can hear every word spoken in the mess hall and if your curiosity gets the better of you, here is a small knothole in the door. It affords an unobstructed view of our guests."

He thrust her gently within and closed the door. The girl found a seat on a sack of potatoes and nervously awaited the next move of this extraordinary transplanted New Englander.

CHAPTER V

THERE sounded presently, along the path from the house, the clumping of many boots. The mob had left its automobiles in front of the ranch-house and was coming on foot to the mess hall. Lee Purdy's pleasant voice was speaking:

"Hello, Jake. Hello, men. I've been expecting you. Saw you coming five miles away."

"We want that Chinaman, Purdy," a husky voice made answer.

"I knew that too, Jake. Well, I suppose you'll have to have him if you really want him. He doesn't appear to be very much worried about your visit; consequently I concluded to view the situation rather calmly myself."

"That's where you're sensible, Purdy. Where's the Chink?"

"He's helping Joaquin get breakfast for you boys."

"Well, I'll be shot!" said the husky-voiced Jake, and proved he was a human being by emitting a brief chuckle. Others followed his example. Having anticipated trouble and keyed themselves to meet it, they found relief in their pleasant reaction to the attitude of the master of the Enchanted Hill. Purdy continued:

"I had an idea you boys would not be averse to ham and eggs and hot coffee before proceeding on your way with Chan. By the way, what are you going to do with him, Jake?"

"We're going to hang him to a convenient tree," Jake replied ferociously.

"Well, there are a dozen trees extremely convenient. Will you boys have breakfast before or after the interesting event?"

Ensued a brief silence and a murmur of voices. The situation was being canvassed. Lee Purdy's cheerful voice interrupted. "There are two excellent arguments for and against breakfasting before and after, Jake. Those who breakfast before may lose their breakfast after. It is no unusual thing for strong men to become ill at a hanging. On the other hand, those who elect to breakfast after may discover they have lost their appetite for breakfast. My principal argument in favor of immediate acceptance, however, lies in the novelty of my entertainment, plus the superior service. The man you plan to hang after breakfast will wait on you during breakfast. How's that for an original idea, Jake?"

"I dunno," the man Jake replied suspiciously. "I don't rightly know how to take you, Purdy. How do I know you won't poison us?"

"Don't feel badly about that, Jake. Nobody in this country ever understands me, and if you suspect poison, why, I'll trade breakfasts with any man present and eat them to the limit of my capacity."

The Chinaman appeared in the door of the mess hall. "Come and gettee," he piped shrilly. "You no come and gettee I thlow him out."

It was too much. The mob laughed. "Come on, Jake," one of them urged. "We can't be outdone in politeness; we got to be as good sports as Purdy an'

that Chinaman. At that the heathen is scared to death."

"You're a man of remarkable penetration, Joe," Purdy replied to this last speaker. "My little friend Chan is indeed badly frightened. Consequently, if his hand should shake while he's serving the coffee and if the overflow should scald some of you, I know you will understand and forgive him. Come in, boys. Welcome to La Cuesta Encantada. Chuck your rifles in the corner, but hang on to your lesser hardware if you still suspect me of guile."

Through the tiny knot-hole in the commissary door Gail Ormsby watched the men from Arguello shuffle into the mess hall, hang their hats on the wall pegs and take their seats. While they were not a particularly presentable lot of men, neither were they of a type particularly villainous-looking. There were a couple of half-breed Mexicans among them. The others were ranchers or cow-hands; some might have been town loafers.

The trembling Chan passed around the table, setting huge platters laden with ham and eggs, which in turn were passed from guest to guest, who scooped the contents off onto plates. The coffee-pot traveled briskly up and down the table and there was no general conversation. Nobody offered anything to anybody; all Gail heard was an occasional "I'll trouble you for the coffee-pot" or "I'll trouble you for the bread," "*Gracias, amigo*" or "Much obliged." In their primitive way the members of this quiet mob were meticulously polite to each other. Gail concluded that these men were not ferocious thugs bent on a lynching for the

fun of it, but rather serious-minded men with a yearning for justice, albeit not too particular as to the methods to be employed in securing it. Racial resentment was quite as much at the bottom of their mental attitude as was their primitive instinct to avenge a murderous assault on a prominent citizen whose friends were as numerous and sincere as his enemies.

Breakfast is quickly over when one gives himself up to rapid and efficient eating. Ten minutes sufficed for the majority of the guests, and these at once rolled cigarettes and sat back to enjoy the fruits of their digital dexterity. The man Jake, a huge fellow with an appetite to match, was the last man to finish; plainly the others had remained seated at the table out of respect for Jake. Purdy had gone into the kitchen, apparently to assist Chan in bearing food to his guests, and upon the occasion of his last trip in he had remained there. He leaned out of the kitchen now into the mess hall, his elbows resting on a twelve-inch wooden shelf that crowned the half-wall between kitchen and mess hall. As Jake drained the last cup of coffee and looked up he caught Purdy's calm blue eyes fixed upon him.

"Have you had enough to eat, Jake?" he queried hospitably.

"Full up," Jake answered heartily. Then, as Chan leaned over him to fill his cup again, he caught the little Oriental's wrist in his huge hand. "Well, I reckon we might as well proceed, gentlemen," he said to his fellows.

"May I crave your indulgence for about fifteen min-

utes, Jake?" Lee Purdy called mildly. "Chan hasn't had any breakfast yet. Is it quite fair to hang him on an empty stomach? Personally, I have never read of a hanging where the condemned man did not arise early and partake of a hearty breakfast."

"Well, I won't argue the question, Purdy. He can eat breakfast if he wants to, but I'm here to tell you that if he tries to get out of that kitchen before I send for him, Joaquin can use him for a sieve."

Jake released his hold on the little Chinaman and struck him a heavy blow across the face with his hard open hand. Chan fled to the kitchen and then Lee Purdy spoke again.

"Are you boys dead set on hanging Chan? Has Todd died from the effects of that crack on the head?"

"No, but it looks mighty like he might, Purdy."

"Well, in any event it doesn't suit me to have you and your friends take the law into your own hands, Jake. Now listen. You've partaken of my hospitality, so out of sheer politeness you'll have to listen to my argument for the defendant. I'll make it snappy and if when I have finished you boys still think that the right and reasonable thing to do is to hang Chan, why, go to it. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Fair enough," half a dozen voices answered.

"And you all agree not to interrupt me while I'm pleading for fair play for this Chinaman?"

"Absolutely." Apparently the resolution was unanimous.

Beside Purdy stood a small kitchen table, the top of which was level with the twelve-inch shelf upon which the master of the Enchanted Hill had been leaning.

Upon the table something—had any of Purdy's guests been asked to guess what this something might be they would have replied "dirty dishes"—had been piled and a soiled table-cloth spread over it. Purdy stepped around in back of this table, whisked the soiled table-cloth off with his left hand and with his right swung the muzzle of a machine gun into position to rake the long table with his fire. Simultaneously his voice rang out, harsh, dissonant, with a metallic ring in it—the voice of a soldier giving orders. And when a trained soldier gives an order there is that in his voice, in his bearing, which enforces instantaneous obedience as readily as does the knowledge of the punishment disobedience will entail.

"Hands up—everybody!"

He did not wait for them to obey. Indeed, he knew more than to expect unanimous acquiescence to his command, since in all probability none of his guests had hitherto seen a machine gun. In their ignorance they would not realize that he was threatening them. Therefore it behooved him to impress them. He pulled the trigger and fired a burst down the center of the table between the two lines of men; and the hiss of the bullets, their crash through the rear of the mess hall and the furiously fast staccato explosions convinced the half-dozen doubting Thomases of the urgent necessity for prompt obedience. Twenty-four pairs of arms shot skyward, but the leader, Jake, sat calmly staring at Purdy.

"What kind of a contraption is that thing?"

"It's a machine gun, Jake. If I spray it down this table I can riddle twelve men in a row—like that!"

"You'd have to move the table over a few feet in order to riddle thirteen on this side of the table—like that! Thirteen's an unlucky number."

Jake's hand was under the table. Purdy, realizing that when that hand came up it would be holding a barking forty-five, swung the barrel of his machine gun and covered Jake. The two men stared at each other for an instant, unafraid—then from his post in front of the cook stove Joaquin José Ramon Oreña y Sanchez spoke.

"I bet you my life t'irteen she ees *muy* unlucky—for *numero* t'irteen." He reached into a bread pan on the sink beside him where reposed, ready to his hand, a weapon that Jake knew and understood—to wit, an old single-action forty-five-caliber pistol, with a six-inch barrel. From his hip the descendant of a hundred peons fired at Jake, and the bullet ripped away a fair-sized section from Jake's large, radiant right ear. Joaquin cocked his pistol and smiled.

"Mebbeso, Señor Jake, you theenk these gun don' go off, no?" he suggested sweetly. "Please! I theenk ees *poco mas major* eef the señor find out pretty queeck who she is the boss of thees rancho."

"Some peevish Greaser," Jake complained, but his hands went up.

Purdy laughed long and heartily. "Well, Jake, you're no longer a maverick," he declared. "Joaquin has run his earmark on you; the first thing you know he'll beef you. He tried hard enough to do it a moment ago."

"I'll get him for that," said Jake simply.

"You'll have to get me first in order to enjoy that

privilege, Jake." Purdy half turned to his cook. "*Gracias*, Joaquin. If I could afford it I'd raise your wages for that." Then to his guests:

"Gentlemen!" He paused, after the manner of the trained speaker, and his grave face lighted with a little, whimsical smile.

"There isn't going to be any hanging today. You all agree with me that there isn't going to be any hanging today, do you not?" He glanced interestedly up and down the two lines of faces turned toward him. "All those in favor of a hanging today will signify by saying 'Aye.' All those not in favor of a hanging today will signify by saying 'No.' The 'Noes' have it and it is so ordered."

"You'd ought to run for a political office, Purdy," Jake jeered. "You got a nice, pleasant line o' conversation."

"Thank you, Jake. I'm not through making my speech yet, so until I give you permission to interrupt me, please do not do so again. Joaquin, if that fat idiot opens his mouth before I ask him to, do me a favor and notch his other ear. That may induce him to harken to good sound advice in the future. Now then, Jake, I'm talking to you. If there is to be a hanging later, when I'm not present, I trust you will not be so foolish as to superintend the obsequies. I grow a trifle weary of you, Jake Dort. You will persist in calling yourself to my attention; some day you're going to speak out of your turn and I'll be the only person present to take down your last words. Now, then, beginning with you, Jake, the gentlemen on the left side of the table will rise without indecent

haste and deposit their artillery on the table in front of them. Having done so, each man in turn will pass out the door, pausing at the door, however, long enough for this trembling exile from far Cathay to pat him on the hips and under the arms for extra and concealed lighter artillery. Each gentleman will then step outside and sit down under yonder oak tree. All set? Jake, it's your deal and the play is to the left."

When the mess hall was empty Purdy opened the door of the commissary.

"Come out, please, Miss Ormsby," he requested, and the girl, pale but composed, obeyed. Purdy took her by the arm and led her to the door. "Gentlemen," he said, "I have pleasure in presenting to you the orator of the day, Miss Gail Ormsby. Miss Ormsby has been looking at you naughty lads through a knothole and has enjoyed immensely the spectacle of twenty-five good men and true metamorphosed into monkeys. Gentlemen, Miss Ormsby!"

Miss Ormsby was received in absolute silence. "The next time you men come to a gentleman's house," she commenced, "wait until you are invited. And never again make the mistake of thinking that because a man wears rather full riding trousers, riding boots and a necktie, he isn't a gentleman—that he is devoid of brains and courage. Please return to Arguello and stay there. I thank you."

"Jake, on behalf of the visiting brethren may we not have a few extemporaneous remarks from you?" Purdy pleaded.

To his credit be it said that Jake Dort found his feet, doffed his hat and bowed low to the two on the

mess-hall steps. "Thus endeth the first lesson, my brethren," he declared comically. "And the moral is—never bunch up for a flock shooter, and when you accept his invitation to breakfast, frisk him first and then make him sit between two of your trusted friends. While realizin' that we return to Arguello lookin' more or less ridiculous, still we'll get there with what dignity we can muster. Miss Ormsby, *adiós!* Mr. Purdy, sir—until we meet again."

And he sat down and applied a red bandanna handkerchief to his ear. Gail Ormsby broke the silence.

"I believe most of you men would almost rather be robbed of your chewing tobacco than be made ridiculous. Personally, I think it would be rather nice to have you return to Arguello looking as brave and full of conceit as when you left it; therefore, if any gentleman present wishes his weapon he can have it by pledging me his word of honor not to use it on this ranch and to refrain from assisting in the lynching of Chan today, tomorrow or any other day. When you return to Arguello you can tell Ira Todd and your friends whatever tale occurs to you."

"That's a fair proposition, miss," a member of the mob declared. "I paid twenty-four dollars for that gun of mine and I don't want to lose it. You've got my word of honor, miss."

"And mine—and mine!" There was a chorus of assent from a badly disorganized and chopfallen crew; one by one they came forward and selected their weapons from the pile which, at Purdy's command, Chan brought forth from the mess hall. Jake Dort, however, declined to surrender.

"I don't think so much of that old gun o' mine anyhow," he defended his action. "It ain't balanced proper and I always did tend to shoot high with it."

Five minutes later all that was left to remind the dwellers on La Cuesta Encantada of the visit of the mob from Arguello was Jake Dort's gun, the dust of their going and an unusually heavy job of dish-washing confronting Joaquin José Ramon Oreña y Sanchez and his volunteer assistant, the temperamental Chan.

CHAPTER VI

"WHO is Jake Dort?" Gail queried when, an hour later, she and Purdy sat down to breakfast.

"Jake is the range boss of the Box K Ranch. Good cow-hand, too. Ira Todd thinks a lot of him, and I imagine he thinks a lot of Ira Todd. Jake felt, I dare say, that it was up to him to prove his fealty to his boss."

"Do you mean, seriously, that Jake Dort is an employee of mine?"

"He's the range boss of the Box K Ranch. I wasn't aware that you own the Box K Ranch, but if you do, Jake Dort is most certainly on your pay-roll."

"I do own the Box K Ranch, and Ira Todd is my manager. And I shall exercise my prerogative as owner to sever Mr. Dort from the ranch pay-roll very promptly."

"Are you quite certain you have sufficient money to pay him off?"

The girl looked at him, startled. "That is a very —very—leading question, isn't it?" she queried a little coldly. "I wonder why you ask it."

"I do not mean to be inquisitive or rude, but I have heard a persistent rumor to the effect that Jake is several months overdue on his wages, and I know of my own knowledge that the account of the Box K Ranch at the bank in Arguello is overdrawn."

"I—I didn't know that. How did you learn it?"

"I've a friend who is a director of that bank. Please forgive me for discussing your private affairs. I didn't think you did know it, hence I thought it only decent to spare you the embarrassment of firing Jake only to have him back-fire on you. I've had to discharge a few men in my day and I have always found it most convenient to pay them off in full when I say good-by."

Gail looked at her host humorously. "I fear Jake is going to remain on the pay-roll indefinitely, Mr. Purdy. And of course that means I shall have to be very civil to him when next we meet."

"It's terrible to be poor."

"How do you know? You aren't poor," Gail protested.

"Oh, yes, I am! I've been broke for a year."

"But you own a huge cattle ranch."

"I own an equity in it," he corrected, "and equities in real estate are not comforting assets in time of national financial disaster. I have to earn money to meet my payments on account of the principal of the mortgage, and yesterday I sent to market three hundred steers that weren't any more ready for market than the market is ready for them. But I've got to meet my interest. I've noticed that where the security is ample and the interest is kept paid, holders of mortgages are not so apt to foreclose, even when the mortgage is past due."

"Is the entire cattle business in the same slough of despond?"

"It is, Miss Ormsby—at least in the Southwest.

There has been drought in Texas and Arizona and with short feed it has been necessary to market the aged stuff at whatever price it will bring; there has been a wild scramble to unload feeders at starvation prices on cattlemen in New Mexico, Colorado, California and Nevada who have range to take care of them. But the banks will not lend money on cattle this year and the cattle loan companies are holding all the cattle paper they want; they cannot discount it and they have to carry it. Nobody seems to have any confidence in the business and the market price for beef is below the cost of production."

"Then the situation is truly desperate?"

"Truly. For instance, Bill Canfield, who ranges over on the Santa Margarita, is so broke he creaks when he gets off his horse. And yet a year ago Bill could borrow fifty thousand dollars without an indorser and without collateral. About a month ago Bill received word from the station agent at Arguello that the latter was holding for him, thirty-five dollars c. o. d., an express package containing a pair of fancy boots he had ordered before the panic from the best bootmaker in Kansas City.

"Now Bill needed those boots very badly, but he didn't have a cent of cash money to pay for them. Nobody else had any, so he couldn't borrow on the strength of his heart-breaking story; his notes were past due at the bank, so he was out of luck there, and when he tried selling some saddle-horses nobody would buy them. He was about to commit suicide or hold up a train when he happened to recall that he had on hand quite a collection of dry hides. Hides

had been accumulating on his ranch for years, so he piled them all on a wagon and drove down to Arguello. Dry, warped and contrary cowhides are hard to load on a wagon and thirty of them make a load bigger than a jag of hay. Bill had fifty and on his way to town he had to trim his cargo fifty times. But still he was happy, for in the good old war days he had been accustomed to receive three dollars each for prime hides; and he brought nothing but prime hides to town with him. Surely he would be able to get a dollar and a half each for them now!

"Alas! The local dealer wouldn't even make him a bid and rather than take them back to the ranch he sawed them off on a Jew peddler who had never dealt in hides before but was willing to try anything once. He paid Bill twenty-five cents per hide, which left Bill ten dollars short of the amount necessary to get his boots out of the express office. So Bill sat in at a twenty-five-cent limit game of poker and played the best poker he knew.

"By sundown he was twelve dollars to the good, so he cashed in and, it being a neighborly little game, accepted a friend's check for twenty-five dollars on an Albuquerque bank, returning thirteen dollars change. The station agent would accept the check for collection only, however, so Bill sat around town until the bank at Albuquerque wired non-payment because of insufficient funds. Meanwhile the drawer of the check had spent the thirteen dollars change and the fatal telegram was the first intimation he had that his bank would no longer honor a small overdraft. Of course, he offered to secure Bill with his horse and outfit, but

Bill had all the assets of that sort he needed. What he wanted was cash.

"So there he was, marooned in Arguello, with his old boots practically gone and his remaining funds fast disappearing. Finally it occurred to him to borrow the money from our friend Chan. Of course the thrifty little Celestial had it to loan and Bill got his boots out of chancery and went home, but his experience will indicate to you the financial straits to which cowmen in these parts have been reduced."

"But why didn't Bill Canfield sell some of his cattle?" Gail queried. "It seems such an unbelievable tale!"

"He couldn't sell a single head. They're all mortgaged to the Southwest Cattle Loan Corporation, and if Bill had sold mortgaged property without their consent and used the money to buy a pair of boots, he would have been a felon under the law."

"The cattle of the Box K Ranch are mortgaged to that same loan company, Mr. Purdy," Gail confessed.

"Don't preen yourself over that, Miss Ormsby. Four thousand head of my cattle dwell under the same plaster. I was able to hold out a thousand head of aged stuff they didn't know anything about, else they would have insisted upon my including that lot in their security, after the value of cattle had so depreciated they could claim their security had fallen below a reasonable margin of safety."

"How fortunate you were to escape that! The Box K Ranch borrowed in order to buy more cattle, and when the note fell due the loan company threatened to foreclose unless we gave them additional security.

We couldn't meet the note so we gave the additional security."

"I'm sorry about that, Miss Ormsby. I had a sneaking impression that they might learn of the thousand head I kept in my winter pasture when I turned the other stock loose on the summer range. So I rushed them to market before I could receive a visit from the loan company's agent. He'll be here in a day or two with his polite ultimatum, only to discover that the additional security he hopes to scare out of me has been sold. I shipped the last of the lot yesterday."

"Will they then foreclose on the other four thousand head? Or are you fortunate in that your note is not due for some time?"

"My note is overdue but the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation will not foreclose—not this year."

"Why?"

"Because I'm too wary a bird to be beguiled into flying into that outfit's cage and permitting them to close the door on me. Had Ira Todd been as wary he would not have given those loan sharks a first chattel mortgage on your hitherto unmortgaged stock; he made the mistake of accepting the agent's verbal promise that the note would be renewed for two years. The promise, it seems, was not made in the presence of witnesses, so now the corporation may, if it desires, repudiate its agent's alleged promise and make demand upon you for payment of the note in, say, thirty days' time; otherwise foreclosure proceedings will be instituted."

Gail Ormsby gazed with new interest upon the sage of La Cuesta Encantada. "How did you ascertain

that?" she demanded. "Ira Todd only wired me that news three days ago, and I came here at once to see what could be done about it."

"I didn't know it, Miss Ormsby. I didn't even know your cattle had been mortgaged until you voluntarily disclosed the fact. But when you added that Todd had acquiesced in their demand for additional security, I guessed at once the trap into which you had fallen. The Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation is owned by a coterie of bankers who in their ordinary banking affairs dislike cattle loans for two reasons: There is an element of risk to them and the rate of interest which they dare charge is not as high as a non-banking institution can exact. Also, as the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation, they can do things which as bankers they would be afraid to do and which, if done, would put them out of business as bankers.

"Understand me, Miss Ormsby. Ordinarily this loan corporation would not put up this dirty job on you, but nothing makes greedy or money-loving men so cowardly and contemptible as a threatened loss. Realizing that this very human characteristic lies sleeping but never dead in the souls of all money-lenders, I made up my mind the moment the post-war deflation developed into an international panic to make these people shoulder their burden of risk in so far as I was concerned; to force them to carry me and not sacrifice me to their greed and timidity. I think I have succeeded in doing just that."

"I wish Ira Todd had been as shrewd."

Purdy smiled. "Well, Ira Todd isn't a Yankee and I am. Todd is a product of these wide, unsullied

spaces, where, theoretically, men are men, whereas I come from Worcester, Massachusetts, a city given over in the main to textile manufacturing, close figuring, keen bargaining, child labor and a horizon largely limited by factory chimneys. Life is harder, closer, colder there. Do not blame Ira Todd for not having been as shrewd as you think I have been. He has been accustomed all of his life to sealing a bargain with a hand-shake. Where I come from we like to seal it before a notary public; we make a virtue of being orderly and practical."

"I greatly fear," Gail answered sadly, "I did not meet you soon enough. Now, with Mr. Todd unable—as I dare say he will be—to attend to business for a few weeks, I—I—I—well, it's going to be terribly embarrassing."

Her voice quavered ever so slightly; Lee Purdy glanced at her with quick sympathy; from his ever ready humor and resourcefulness the quiet, prescient little smile was born and brought to the girl a sense of comfort and safety.

"It is an ill wind," he assured her, "that doesn't blow somebody good. I think that Chinaman will in the long run prove to have been a divinely appointed agent, in that, by his action in placing Ira Todd on sick report for a month, you are given a free hand in the management of your property. Would you care to have me advise you—in the absence of Ira Todd?"

"I shall be tremendously grateful if you will."

"In which event I shall be sufficiently rewarded. Now, then, my advice to you is to cross your bridges

when you come to them. What you need more than money is time—time to grow out your cattle and make them more valuable, even at the present ruinous price of beef; time to estimate the situation; time to permit the country to recover its accustomed financial balance and insure a profitable market for your cattle; time to descend upon the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation and move its hard corporate heart to a reconsideration of the verbal promise of its agent; time to take stock of your other assets and realize on them, sacrificing them, if need be, to save your property here, or sacrificing your property here to protect your other assets. Just at present your handicap lies in an appalling lack of time to do anything."

"Well, of course, in a real pinch I can sell the ranch and the cattle, pay the cattle mortgage and have something left."

He gazed at her solemnly. A man would have realized that he doubted her ability to unload under fire, but did not care to disturb her by expressing his doubt too frankly.

"Yes, that is possible," he admitted. "If you contemplate a sale of your ranch, however, it would be well to dispose of it as soon as you decide that you cannot pay your cattle mortgage—and that the cattle loan company will not extend your note."

"Please tell me why."

"Suppose," he continued, "that when the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation shall have foreclosed on all of your cattle; when those cattle shall have been bought in by a secret agent of the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation at the sheriff's sale for, say,

two cents a pound on the hoof, when they are worth not less than five cents at a sacrifice—that the Southwestern Cattle Loan Association finds itself with a deficiency judgment against you and proceeds to levy against your ranch! What then?"

"That would be too preposterous for consideration, Mr. Purdy. What with the additional cattle pledged, the security is ample to repay the loan, even at a sacrifice sale. Mr. Todd says so."

"Fortunately Mr. Todd lies in the railroad hospital at Arguello with a dent in his ingenious head and I have taken over his job of advising you. Now, I assure you, Miss Ormsby, the hypothetical situation I have sketched for you is not only possible, but something tells me it is extremely probable. If your ranch is worth a hundred thousand dollars and a creditor should secure a deficiency judgment against it for five thousand dollars, and you should be unable to protect your property at the sheriff's sale, then your ranch will be sold for five thousand dollars to satisfy that judgment. If nobody should bid against your creditor the court would assume that your ranch was worth only five thousand dollars, and accordingly the sale would be confirmed."

"But I could sell the property first and pay the deficiency judgment afterward."

"You might not receive very much for it if people knew that you were forced to sell it in order to pay a deficiency judgment," he reminded her. "And a cattle range is absolutely unsalable on short notice even at a sacrifice and particularly at a time like the present."

"Thank goodness no such impasse presents itself

in my case, Mr. Purdy. I can sell my interest to Mr. Doak, who is the attorney who settled my Uncle Aleck's estate. I inherited the Box K Ranch from him."

There was a sudden silence while Lee Purdy salted and peppered his fried eggs. Then: "How long is it since Mr. Doak made you that offer?"

"A week ago. In fact, his offer constituted another reason why I thought I ought to come down here and investigate the property."

"Would I be too inquisitive—as your adviser—if I asked what sum he offered you?"

"He did not mention any sum. He said he would take a flyer in it, entirely as a gambling proposition, at the value at which the property had been appraised after Uncle Aleck's death."

Abruptly Purdy changed the conversation. "Have you ever done any flying?"

"Once, as a passenger. I paid ten dollars for the thrill."

"Like it?"

"Very much indeed."

"Good! Right after breakfast I'll roll out a two-seater and we'll fly to your ranch and look things over. With Ira Todd absent and you present, I may dare to land in that alfalfa field."

"Oh, great! I shan't be the least bit afraid."

"She's a steady, dependable old bus, and in the event of a forced landing I can come down in El Valle de los Ojos Negros. The vegetation there is stunted sage in spots and very sparse and we can taxi over it without going on our nose. The secret of safe flying is altitude. If you're up twenty thousand feet and the

motor stalls, you can volplane ten or fifteen miles and pick your landing."

"This will be a lark!"

"Have you by any chance riding breeches, boots and sweater in your trunk?"

The girl nodded.

"Wear them," he commanded. "I'll fix you up with a fleece-lined leather coat and helmet and furnish a fur robe to wrap around your legs."

"Major Purdy, you're the shadow of a rock in a weary land," Gail declared. "Now you *have* taken away my appetite for breakfast."

"It does appear that we are to have a fairly busy and exciting day," he agreed. "We'll be back in time for luncheon. After luncheon I'll hop into Arguello and leave you here to entertain Hallie. She doesn't leave her bed until noon."

Gail reflected that another man would have informed her that he would leave her at the ranch to be entertained by Hallie! Here, she reflected, was a man who thought straight and talked straight. She fell to studying his face in repose, to pondering about him, as she nibbled at her toast and sipped a cup of coffee. Purdy appeared to sense her desire for silence, for thereafter he forbore intruding upon her mental privacy. And for this she liked him, too. He could talk earnestly, sincerely, entertainingly and at length when he had something to discuss; when he had nothing to discuss he preferred silence. Gail concluded he was not a man given to small talk or the making of pretty speeches to women. Well-mannered and well-bred, he would have been at home in any drawing-room, yet

he preferred his own simple abode here in the lonely solitude of this land of magnificent distances.

She wondered how old he was and deduced that he might be anywhere between twenty-eight and forty. He was about six feet tall, big-boned, with just sufficient flesh on his frame to spell the difference between curves and angles. He was not a handsome man; his features were too rugged, too characterful for that; he gave one an impression of manly wholesomeness, of one hundred per cent masculinity, of tolerance, gentleness, understanding. During the early-morning visit of Jake Dort and his braves she had seen that he was a man of ready wit, calm, resourceful, cunning and courageous, but not offensively so. He did not flaunt his he-mannishness to the world, but hid it behind natural and inherited good breeding. Gail assured herself that whatever of good or of evil this man might accomplish, it would be done deliberately, sanely and without regret for its accomplishment.

She liked him too for his tender attitude toward Hallie. When he had carried her light frail form from the living-room to her bedroom the night before, there had been paternity more than fraternity in his action; surely he must have been a man grown when Hallie was a baby. Not that he looked it and not that he looked boyish, either. Gail detected in his face and manner a maturity that comes, not so much from the living of years as from years of living. Very early in life, Gail thought, this man had had his illusions shattered in contact with men who "played for keeps."

Instinctively there rose in Gail Ormsby's heart a hot resentment against Todd, the man she had never met.

CHAPTER VII

CHAN and Joaquin, summoned from the cook-house, carried Gail's trunk to her chamber. Here, while dressing for the flight, she heard from a distance the explosive staccato of a motor starting unmuffled.

Came the Mexican woman, Conchita, with the promised fleece-lined leather coat and helmet, with a pair of gauntlet riding gloves for additional protection against the chill of the high altitudes at which Lee Purdy always flew. When at last, garbed for the journey, Gail emerged from her room she found Purdy waiting for her in the patio. He too wore leather coat and helmet, and he carried a thermos bottle.

"Hot chocolate," he explained in answer to Gail's inquiring look. "I'm going to fly around the Cuyamaca Reserve while I'm out; no sense wasting gasoline purely on a pleasure flight, and this chocolate will be welcome when we alight at your ranch."

He led the way out the rear of the patio and up over the crest of the Enchanted Hill, which spread away in a flower-spangled mesa. About four hundred yards from the house stood his hangars, three in number, and in front of one of them a two-seated airplane, with a vermilion fuselage, stood, warming up, with a mechanic standing by.

"The old ship's shooting on all six perfectly, Tommy," Purdy complimented his man.

"I overhauled and adjusted the timing, Major," the mechanician replied. "I have inspected her. She is ready for flight."

"Thank you, Tommy; I'm going to fly around the Cuyamaca today, so you need not bother going out with the single-seater. Miss Ormsby will accompany me."

The man swung a small, two-step, wooden mounting block into position and at a signal from Purdy, Gail climbed into the plane and took her seat. Purdy wrapped the fur robe around her, strapped her in, took his seat at the wheel, taxied across the mesa and, coming up into the wind, opened the throttle and took to the air. They were off the Enchanted Hill in a minute and climbing swiftly over the plain below, headed north. Up, up they went, in great spirals, constantly gaining altitude and constantly making their northing. Presently they were up twelve thousand feet and Purdy straightened the ship away on her course. Now the grayish whiteness over which they had been hovering gave way to a darker hue, constantly increasing in density until it became a blur extending up the sides of the Cuyamaca range to where the last of the snow of the preceding winter still lingered. Purdy flew across the south toe of the range and swung north again; as he flew he scanned the region below him on both sides of the plane.

They had traversed the eastern boundary of the reserve and had swung west around the northern flank when suddenly Purdy glanced back at his passenger, satisfied himself he had caught her attention and pointed downward. Following the direction of his

finger the girl descried a thin wavering pillar of smoke rising straight upward from the dark blue blur of timber. When she looked up Purdy was shaking his head sagely; then the nose of the ship was pointed downward and the earth came rapidly up to meet them.

At a height of about a thousand feet even Gail could see that a fire was smoldering in the woods. Purdy came down slowly and circled over the tree tops, honking his horn, peering over the side for signs of human life in the vicinity of the fire. Finding none, he climbed again and flew south along the western base of the range for about ten miles; when a flat green field appeared outspread before them he darted down to a perfect landing. Two horses grazing in the field fled affrightedly as Purdy taxied across the field and pulled up before an unpainted pine shanty at the edge of the timber. In the doorway a man, clad in the heather-green uniform of the forest ranger service, stood and awaited their approach.

"Hello, Lee," he saluted cordially. "Is this visit one of business or pleasure?"

"A camp-fire is coming to life in the cañon of the middle fork of the Rio Hondo, Mac," Purdy replied. "No flame as yet, but plenty of smoke. The fire is creeping along under the ground, in the mattress of twigs and leaves. Better telephone Barclay. I honked over his station but he wasn't on station and as you know there's no landing place on his jurisdiction."

The ranger nodded. "See any sheep, Lee?"

"Lots of them, Mac."

"It's those filthy Basque shepherds. They haven't

the remotest respect for law and order. They probably camped on the middle fork last night; it would be like them to go away and leave their camp-fire burning."

"What's the matter with Barclay?"

"He's a weak sister. I think the Basques have him bluffed. He swears he hasn't found any sheep on his range, but admits he's found some sign. Wherever I can find fresh sign I can find sheep. They don't get down on my range."

He turned and entered the shanty and Gail could hear him grinding at the crank of the telephone bell—one, two, three, one, two, three. For ten minutes she listened to his futile effort to raise the other ranger station; she could sympathize with his air of impatience and disgust when again he appeared at the door.

"Lee," he called, "I can't raise Barclay, so it's up to me to put that fire out. Can you give me a quick lift up to the Middle Fork? If you'll drop me at the rancheria of that old Navajo, Bear Tooth, I'll borrow a horse. He and his sons have a homestead on the edge of the reserve. It's fenced and they're raising Navajo sheep. Bear Tooth will let me have a pony and in an hour I'll be up on Barclay's station. I can put out that fire if it hasn't got too much headway; then I'll trail the men who started it, and by Judas priest, if I catch them their sheep will be shepherdless tonight. The *juzgado* at Arguello is waiting for them."

"Certainly, Mac." Purdy climbed out of the ship and bent his back beside it. "Please hop out on my back and then jump to the ground, Miss Ormsby," he

commanded rather than requested, and the girl obeyed instantly. "Miss Ormsby, permit me to present Ranger MacDougald," he continued. "Mac, Miss Ormsby is old Aleck Garnett's niece and has inherited the Box K Ranch. She's out here looking after the property and I was about to give her a lift over to her place when I noticed the smoke on the Middle Fork." He turned to Gail. "If you will be good enough to remain here for half an hour and make friends with Mac's collie dog——" he began, but the ranger interrupted.

"You'll have to introduce yourself to the cat, Miss Ormsby. The dog goes with me. It would break his heart to be left behind." He whistled and a large, splendid sable and white collie came out of the shanty and stood yawning and smiling at the guests. "He's an imported Scotch collie," MacDougald announced pridefully. "His name is Whuskey. Whuskey, pay your respects to the lady."

Whuskey smiled, wagged his tail and with many a smirk and twist of his handsome body, came down the steps and kissed Gail's hand. Meanwhile the ranger had got his coat, pistol, belt, rifle and two pairs of handcuffs, which he dropped into the bottom of the fuselage and climbed in after.

"I'll be back in about thirty minutes," Purdy assured the girl. "You'll be quite safe here." He lifted Whuskey up into the ranger's lap, climbed into his seat, taxied around the edge of the field and was off on his errand.

When the plane was out of sight Gail entered the ranger's cabin and took stock of its contents, which were few and simple. A small cookstove, a few

kitchen utensils and plain dishes, some groceries on a shelf, a flitch of bacon pendent from a rafter, an oil-cloth-covered, home-made table and a packing case with a galvanized bucket of spring water standing on it completed the furnishings of the kitchen.

The remaining room was a combination living-room and bedroom, with an open stone fireplace and about a quarter of a cord of two-foot logs neatly stacked along the wall. A razor strop hanging to a nail driven in an upright, a small cracked mirror on a shelf, a tiny unpainted home-made table with some old magazines on it, a shelf with about two dozen books on forestry, modern police methods, Hornaday's "Our Vanishing Wild Life," a treatise on taxidermy and a complete set of Dickens's novels was attached to the wall within ready reach of the ranger's hand as he lay on a collapsible steel cot with a woven wire mattress. Upon it now three blankets lay folded neatly. On top of a large cedar chest in one corner lay an assortment of taxidermist's tools, the cured skin of a ruffed grouse and a copy of the "Use Book," the Bible of the forest ranger service. In another corner stood a small soap-box with some clean rags in it; outstretched thereon lay a large, contented black cat, suckling a litter of four black kittens.

Nowhere was there a single sign of the presence of a woman. In the back yard Gail found a small vegetable garden, enclosed by a twelve-foot wire fence to protect it from deer. Chained to the trunk of a fallen pine and reposing thereon was a small, inquisitive and extremely friendly black bear cub. Beyond the fallen pine and the bear loomed a small rough barn and cor-

ral. In the corral, whither they had fled affrighted, two splendid big saddle-horses rubbed noses with a sagacious old pack-mule, upon whose sorrel sides tufts of white hair gave evidence of ancient saddle galls gained in years of service.

As Gail walked over to the corral to pet the horses and mule her foot struck something. On the ground before her lay an old worn leather wallet. She picked it up and peeped inside. It contained some frayed newspaper clippings and five monthly pay checks drawn on the Treasury of the United States to the order of Stephen MacDougald.

Those uncashed pay checks spelled much to Gail Ormsby. They told her that Steve MacDougald cared little for money because the simple life he lived demanded little; they spelled an unusual devotion to duty since the ranger had not been to town for five months, otherwise surely he would have banked them. Here, with his work, his amateur taxidermy, his proximity to the wild life of the forest reserve, his collie dog, his cat with kittens, his pet bear and saddle-horse and pack-mule, this ranger dwelled in contentment.

Gail laid the wallet on the cedar chest in the shanty. Half an hour after his departure the distant hum of his motor told Gail that Purdy was returning. He swooped down into the field presently and came bumping up to the ranger's cabin.

"Well?" Gail queried.

"Ranger and dog delivered safely," he reported, and climbed out for the purpose of assisting the girl back into the ship.

"I've known men who loved their dogs but never one

who insisted upon taking his dog up in an airplane rather than be separated from him."

"There's method in Mac's madness. When he's making an arrest that big collie is as good as an assistant ranger. One day Mac got a telephone message from the sheriff to the effect that a couple of bad boys who had held up the Overland and killed the express messenger were headed up into the Cuyamaca. Tommy, flying on patrol that morning, had seen their camp-fire and horses and happened to mention the matter to Mac, who took a chance that they might be the men wanted and started out to interview them.

"He surmised they would head up through Hot Creek Meadows, riding in the stream to hide their trail, so he had Tommy give him a lift over the range into the meadows, where he holed up and waited. Sure enough the birds fluttered into his hand, Mac got the drop on them, handcuffed them together and started back with them. Arrived at this cabin they made a sudden concentrated rush on him; before he could protect himself they had butted him in the middle, knocked the wind out of him and thrown him flat on his back. Then they started to kick the life out of him, figuring that after they had killed him they would get the keys out of his pocket, shuck the cuffs, mount and continue their interrupted journey.

"Unfortunately, they neglected to figure on Whuskey. He tore their throats out—you see they were handcuffed together and couldn't fight him off very well. Any rate, when Steve came to, his prisoners were dead and that collie was licking his master's face and whimpering. The government offers a reward of five

thousand dollars, dead or alive, for a mail robber—and Mac brought in the bodies and the stolen registered mail. Then what do you suppose Mac did?"

"What?"

"Refused the reward. Said he was employed by the government at a regular wage and that it was his duty to do the government's work without extra compensation! Ever since, whenever anybody plans to entertain Mac, they've got to figure the dog in too. . . . Well, let's go."

Half an hour later they landed in an alfalfa field that sloped very gently up to a cluster of forlorn-looking unpainted shacks, for the most part made from small logs, with the interstices between the logs calked with cement. A neglected barbed-wire fence surrounded these shacks. In the yard half a dozen mowers, sulky rakes and hay wagons stood parked, exposed to the weather, rusting, deteriorating, neglected. Not a chicken or milch cow appeared in sight. Four cow-ponies stood with bowed heads, tethered to a hitching-rack in front of the bunk-house, and on a long bench just outside the bunk-house four men, booted and spurred, sat idly talking and smoking.

Gail sat in Purdy's airplane and gazed upon her heritage. "So this is the Box K Ranch, is it?" she queried presently.

Purdy nodded.

"What a filthy, neglected, lonely, heart-breaking place!" she protested, and there was a quaver in her voice. "Why, I—I—I had no idea it was like this."

"Well, I had," Purdy replied dryly. "I wouldn't kennel a mean dog in one of those dreary shacks. I

could have told you about it, but Hallie seemed to think you had better see the place first. Seeing is believing. . . . Well, you do not have to stay here, that's one comfort."

"It's terrible," the girl quavered. "Why, what could Mr. Todd have been thinking of to suggest that I come here?"

"Perhaps the owner's quarters are far more presentable inside than out."

"I don't believe it."

"Well, neither do I! If you will be good enough to remove that leather coat and helmet so those suspicious persons yonder may recognize you as a woman, we can manage the forthcoming interview much more amicably. Remember, Miss Ormsby, I am disobeying orders in landing here. I'm out of bounds."

The girl obeyed, but Purdy saw her hands tremble as she unbuckled the helmet. They dismounted from the plane, leaving the motor idling, and together walked toward the men on the bench, who rose to meet them. They were not armed, for they lived in a peaceable country and feared no man. Indeed, they were the sort of cowboys who, while realizing that the possession of a reliable forty-five-caliber pistol is occasionally an asset, keep that asset modestly concealed in the bunk-house or their bedding roll.

They looked at Lee Purdy and his companion with frank curiosity and surprise and raised their hats politely when his companion's sex was revealed to them, despite her masculine attire. "Howdy, Major Purdy! Howdy, ma'am," they said, and stood twirling their old broad-brimmed, weather-beaten headgear.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Miss Ormsby, may I be permitted to present Mr. Pete Howe, Mr. Anse Magruder, Mr. Hank Orton and Mr. Art Appleton?"

The "gentlemen" bowed owlishly and murmured, "Pleased to meet yuh." Gail distributed a wan smile among them and Purdy explained just who Miss Gail Ormsby was. "Of course," he continued gravely, "I would not have alighted in that alfalfa field without Miss Ormsby's permission."

There fell an embarrassing silence. Then Pete Howe found his tongue. "I'm right sorry Mr. Todd ain't here, ma'am. He went to Arguello day before yesterday with Jake Dort, the foreman. We been expectin' 'em back this forenoon."

"He'll not be back for at least a few days," Purdy informed the man and explained the reason.

"Well, Jake'll be back," Pete Howe suggested gloomily. "We got to have somebody to run this ranch."

Gail flattened him with another smile. "Well, Mr. Howe, suppose I try my hand at running it."

Pete Howe smiled at that and his comrades, sensing the humor of this dainty girl's attempting to operate the Box K Ranch, permitted their grave features to lighten a little also. The quartet shrugged.

"Well, we reckon you're who Purdy says you are, ma'am," Pete Howe admitted. "We know Mr. Todd has been expectin' of you, but we're sort of used to receivin' orders from him and Jake Dort."

"Well, he cannot give you orders now and Jake Dort isn't here," Purdy reminded Howe. "Meanwhile, Miss Ormsby has an order to give you. She wants you boys

to mount up, ride down into the winter pasture along the upper Hondo, round up every head of stock there, shoo them outside the fence and let them drift."

"I'm afraid we can't do that, ma'am," Howe replied, addressing himself to Gail and ignoring Purdy. "Mr. Todd never starts the stock to driftin' up to the summer range before the first of June, an' here it is only the middle o' May. We've had a more than usual hard winter an' the snow in the reserve ain't melted long enough to give the feed a chance to start."

"Miss Ormsby will take a chance on that, Howe," Purdy suggested.

A calmly hostile look was Pete Howe's answer.

"Mr. Purdy has transmitted my orders correctly, Mr. Howe," Gail reminded him, notwithstanding the fact that until Lee Purdy had spoken she had had not the slightest idea of what her orders were.

"I reckon we'd better wait until Jake gets back," Art Appleton murmured apologetically. "I see a dust cloud off yonder, so I reckon maybe Jake will be here in about ten minutes."

Following the direction of his gaze Purdy saw the dust cloud and observed that it was coming rapidly toward them across the plain. "That is most probably the estimable Jake," he agreed. "To save argument and embarrassment we will not press the matter until he arrives."

"Won't you set, ma'am?" Pete Howe pleaded hospitably, and waved Gail toward the bench. She thanked him and seated herself; apparently by mutual consent, the cowboys stalked away, sat down on the tongue of a hay wagon and commenced conversing in low tones.

Purdy sat on the bench beside Gail, who was gazing with frank disapproval at her unlovely surroundings.

"I think," she complained, "that there must be something wrong with a man who neglects to plant a tree or two or three around his home."

"Your late Uncle Aleck was interested solely in cows," he reminded her. "He never married; consequently the ranch has never known the refining influence of a woman."

She shivered. "This is a terrible place. I could never live here, even for a part of each year. I shall sell it as soon as I return to Los Angeles."

"Why be in a hurry? Is La Cuesta Encantada an unlovely place from which to direct the destinies of your property? Hallie and I talked it over this morning just before we left, and it was our opinion that after looking the Box K Ranch over it would be much easier for her to persuade you to stay with us until your business in this country is settled. Hallie will issue the formal invitation as soon as we return home. Whenever it may be necessary for you to come over here Tommy or I will be glad to hop off with you."

"I'm sure I do not know what I should have done if I hadn't met you. You're so kind and I'm sure I express my gratitude most inadequately."

"As Pete Howe would say, don't mention it."

"About those orders you gave him. Why did you do it?"

Purdy smiled again his small, knowing smile with just a tinge of malice in it. "I do not see any sense in holding your mortgaged cattle in the winter pasture merely to oblige the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation,

Miss Ormsby. As I understand it, they haven't actually foreclosed on the cattle, so why keep the cattle up, waiting until they do? My plan is to shoo them out on the government range immediately and let them start drifting."

He chuckled. "Once a cow is headed for her summer range she objects strenuously to being driven back to the winter range, so I thought that if the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation wishes to foreclose on your cattle we shouldn't deny it the job of gathering them! Let them pull off a round-up. Let them hire riders and comb the chaparral for a hundred square miles, if they want those cattle bad enough. Let them cut your brand out of a dozen other brands on the government range and see how they like it. It's a forty-man job and the riders have to know the country. I hazard the guess that there isn't a rider in all New Mexico low enough to hire out to them for that round-up."

The girl looked up at him with admiration and gratitude. "Then they couldn't foreclose, could they?" she queried.

"Oh, they could if they wanted to, but after figuring the trouble and expense, they'll come to the conclusion that there is more profit in being decent and human. They'll hold off until the cattle are back in the winter pasture late next fall. Of course that gives you all of six months in which to grow out your young stuff and put fat on the ribs of the aged stuff, which means you will have an opportunity to add twenty to twenty-five dollars a head additional value to your critters, and it will only cost you sixty cents a head grazing fee for the season. And of course there is the chance

that by next fall the beef market will have rallied; and you may be able to find somebody who will lend you enough to pay off the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation and permit you to market your cattle at prevailing prices."

"Your logic is unassailable, Major Purdy. Have you started your cattle drifting?"

"Indeed, yes. About a week ago."

"Then, if I can get my cattle out on the government range, I'll be safe until fall."

"I'll make a small bet at long odds that you will be safe."

"Then out they go. Needs must when the devil drives. I'm a poor, lone, lorn lady, and provided I do nothing illegal, my conscience will not trouble me over the little feelings of the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation."

"Spoken like a man," Purdy complimented her. "And now, here comes our old friend Jake Dort. Jake must have distributed his load of lynchers among the other automobiles after leaving my place and headed straight for home. Hope the ride has cooled him down. Jake isn't a half-bad sort. The trouble with him is that he knows no middle ground. He's an extremist. When he's faithful he's faithful to the death and when he's ornery he's awfully ornery. This is his ornery day. The sight of my old bus parked in the alfalfa has riled him again. . . . Well, you know your orders now, Miss Ormsby. Give them to Jake and do not say please. No requests, mind you. Nothing but an order. Be a commanding officer. If you believe yourself to be one Jake may believe it too. He's going to pitch into

me for daring to come here. Beat him to the assault. Fly at him, girl, fly at him!"

Jake ran his car into the yard, leaped out and came straight toward them. "You know the boss's orders, Purdy," he announced briskly. "You been warned off this ranch and warned fair. I ain't got no gun an' you know why, but just the same you're goin' to git out o' here a-flyin'."

"That's just how I expect to go, Jake," Purdy replied smilingly.

"But not until I tell him to go, Mr. Dort," Gail declared, and stood up. "I'm in command here, and from now on I do not want you to forget that. I'm giving orders on the Box K Ranch, Mr. Dort. Are you prepared to obey my orders?"

Jake stared at her. "Of course not," he answered with characteristic bluntness. "How do I know you're my boss?"

"I have told you so—twice."

Jake continued to stare. Finally he shook his head negatively.

"Jake," said Lee Purdy quietly, "the lady says she owns the Box K Ranch. Doesn't that make her your boss?"

"You shut up. You ain't got nothin' to do with the Box K Ranch or me or this young lady or Ira Todd. I'm Ira Todd's range boss; Ira's in hospital and I'm the boss of this ranch until he gets out. That's final. Miss Ormsby, I ain't takin' your orders."

Pete Howe strolled over. "She ordered us, through Purdy here, to drive the stock out of the winter pasture onto the government range and let 'em drift. I

told her we'd wait to see what you had to say about it."

"Them cattle will stay where they're at," Jake declared. He faced Purdy belligerently. "You vamose."

"Stay where you are, Mr. Purdy, until I am ready to go," Gail commanded.

Jake was equal to the occasion. "How soon, ma'am, will you be ready to go?" he temporized.

"As soon as Mr. Purdy is ready to go."

"Well, he's ready now, ma'am."

"Are you, Mr. Purdy?"

"No. I never do anything under duress."

"Well, I don't like to make trouble in front of a lady," said Jake apologetically, "but I got my orders from Ira Todd last night and I'm going to obey 'em. Purdy, will you go peaceable-like or will you take a lickin' first?"

Purdy glanced at Gail and she saw that the issue was up to her. Instantly she made her decision. "Major Purdy," she announced, "you have laid yourself open to insult and abuse from this man, who is my servant. You have done this in my interest. I am sorry, and I prefer to go now. The odds appear to be five to one against you."

Purdy's heart thrilled. She would let him fight if he chose to do so. Pale, frightened, trembling, she still had control of her thoughts. She still had pride that could not be routed by fear. She was mistress here, yet her authority had been flouted, and Purdy realized that she was at her wit's end to enforce that authority. Providentially the warrior heart of Jake Dort solved the problem.

The range boss turned to his riders. "Don't none

of you boys dast to interfere in my private affairs," he warned them. "I'm boss here and if I can't take care of my authority I'll quit."

"Thank you, Jake, I'll play fair." Lee Purdy removed his aviator's helmet and leather coat. Then he removed the sweater he wore under that and the men of the Box K Ranch saw that he was unarmed. "How do you settle your disputes, Jake?" he asked gently as he drew on his gloves. "Marquis of Queensberry rules or the tom-cat method?"

Jake scratched his head. "I outweigh you by more'n forty pound," he complained. "I reckon it'll have to be a plain stand up, give an' take. Maybe you got more science than me to offset my weight. Anyhow, you make it."

"Well, then, I'll make it a free-for-all, winner take all. I bar only the use of the feet and knees, hitting below the belt and eye-gouging. If you can down me and climb me, do it. Come back of the barn, you fat pig, till I slaughter you."

Together they went back of the barn. Five minutes later Lee Purdy returned, walked to a watering tub in front of the horse barn and washed his gauntlet gloves therein before approaching the four men who sat like four owls on the tongue of the hay wagon.

"Jake cannot enforce his authority on the Box K Ranch, so he has quit. Pete Howe, do you want the job Jake has just quit?"

Pete Howe grinned. "I ain't been paid for the one I hold for nigh onto three months."

"In one week from today all of you boys shall be paid. Will you take my word of honor for that?"

"Your word of honor's good in this country."

"Will you obey Miss Ormsby's orders immediately?"

The four nodded. "Very well, then, Pete. You're the range boss of the Box K Ranch. When Jake comes out of his trance, pile him and his dunnage in that automobile and take him in to Arguello. Leave him there and hustle right back. I take it that's the ranch car."

"We're shy on grub and our cook quit last week. Got to have grub and a cook. We'll be driving nigh onto a week."

"I'll start my cook, with grub and the chuck wagon and orders to meet you tomorrow morning somewhere along the main Rio Hondo, below the junction of the Middle Fork. Keep an eye out for him. I have one rider at the ranch now and I'll come with him and help you. Understood?"

"*Seguro, señor.*"

"Thank you, Pete. Thank all you boys. Miss Ormsby will appreciate your spirit more than most women would, because she understands. She thinks and reasons like a man."

He turned from the four, walked over to the bench and sat down beside Gail. "Thank you," he murmured. "It had to be done, you realized it had to be done and you permitted me to do it. It wasn't a difficult job. Jake is very awkward. He was so big and hard that he was not easy to upset, but once I did upset him he stayed upset. He's finished. He's been humbled in sight of his own men—or rather he will be as soon as they see his face. I chopped him up quite deliberately. Shall we go home now?"

"Please," she pleaded. "Please—you desperado!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE flight back to La Cuesta Encantada was made without incident. Safe on his landing ground once more, Purdy escorted his guest to the house, where Gail changed into more feminine attire and rejoined her host in the living-room. Hallie appeared shortly thereafter and the three went in to luncheon.

Gail was not inclined to uphold her end of the conversation. The knowledge of her financial predicament and the impossibility of her plan to live at the Box K Ranch depressed her; she really did not know which way to turn and presently, attempting to reply to some polite commonplace of Hallie's, she choked up and tears trembled on her lashes. Purdy and his sister exchanged glances, and Hallie rested her little pale hand on the visitor's firm brown one for a moment and patted it in silent sympathy.

"I'm such a soft, flabby idiot," Gail murmured, striving her best to smile despite the fear at her heart. "I haven't the courage of a field-mouse. I'm ashamed of myself. But you see, I'm quite alone in the world and I—I just do not know what to do."

"That's splendid," her host assured her gravely. "Now you'll *have* to depend upon us. I do the thinking for the Purdy family and while I do not always know what to do myself, still I manage to put up such a good bluff that my enemies usually do not suspect my help-

lessness. And when I am stumped Hallie always manages to come forward with a brilliant idea." He turned to Hallie with the affectionate paternal look that always lighted his face when he spoke to his invalid sister. "Hallie Purdy, front, and center!" he commanded. "The commanding officer can see by the look in his adjutant's eye that she is the possessor of a brilliant idea."

"I am," Hallie replied. "I think Miss Ormsby might buck up. After luncheon Conchita will unpack her trunk and Miss Ormsby will be our guest until her affairs are straightened out."

"But I'm a total stranger," Gail protested. "I have no right to thrust myself and my troubles upon you just because you are so surpassingly kind. I'm so grateful, but—when I find it impossible longer to hang on I can let go. I—I—I think I shall sell to Mr. Doak."

"You're begging the question, Miss Ormsby. The question before the house is: Do you or do you not accept Hallie's invitation?"

"For the present I do—most eagerly and gratefully. But I repeat it isn't fair of me to burden you with my worries and griefs, and I shall not do so."

"Well, I'll admit, Miss Ormsby, I have sufficient worries to keep me awake nights. Nevertheless, my desire to take over the administration of your affairs is not altogether a philanthropic one. I'm not so certain that our worries aren't mutual; that we haven't a common enemy to fight and that the best way to insure victory isn't to delegate the responsibility to a supreme command."

"Lee is as capable as any man you could find," Hallie assured her loyally. "He just loves a fight."

"I do not," her brother contradicted. "I loathe a fight."

"Oh, you'll do anything reasonable to avoid one, dear, but you do not evade an issue."

"Well," he admitted, "when one knows he has a fight on his hands, that ruthless enemies are bound to close in on him, it's good strategy not to wait until they do so but to go directly to the assault and employ any weapon handy."

"Who are your enemies, Mr. Purdy?"

"I do not know. That's what keeps me awake nights."

"Do you think I have enemies?"

"Not in the sense that I have. I think you are regarded as one trick they can take with a little trump deuce as soon as they get the joker out of the way. I'm the joker. When you have been smashed financially or hopelessly discouraged you can be bought out—cheap. I am regarded as one difficult to smash financially, not readily discouraged and impossible to buy out—cheap."

The girl looked at her host and into her mind there flashed the vision of the wounded man at San Onofre; she recalled Purdy's white lie to his sister regarding the bullet hole in the shoulder of his coat. With her brother out of the way weak little Hallie would be helpless—as helpless as Gail herself. . . . She understood now what kept him awake o' nights.

"Oh, it's those sheepmen!" Hallie declared. "They want to see your grazing permit and Lee's lapse so they

can run sheep in the Cuyamaca Reserve. If they could have those grazing permits revoked, Miss Ormsby, our summer range would be gone and of course it wouldn't be worth while to carry on in the cattle business without a summer range. It's just a plan of those sheepmen to smash you and Lee so they can buy both winter ranges cheap, or else lease them cheap after you have been driven out of business."

By his silence Lee Purdy appeared to coincide with his sister's explanation. It was apparent to Gail that he desired Hallie to think she had fathomed the reason for his worries. Hallie went on.

"Powerful political influence has been brought to bear on the Department of the Interior to have Lee's grazing privilege canceled. All sorts of silly charges that he has violated the rules of the Forest Reserve have been filed against him since the new supervisor took charge, but thus far they have all fallen flat. The only witnesses are the rangers and they are all very friendly to Lee."

"There was a shake-up in the Department recently." Purdy took up the tale. "Three of the best rangers here—and three of my best friends, too, by the way—have been promoted to assistant supervisorships and transferred to other states. Of course their long, unselfish service had earned them promotion years ago, but nevertheless I'm suspicious of such a belated sense of duty as the Department exhibits."

"How about Steve MacDougald?" Gail queried.

"Oh, Steve received a promotion, too! The notice so amazed him he rode over to discuss it with me. Of course I advised him to accept, but Steve is a suspicious

man. He loathes underhand work and he suspected it here, because he had had a couple of heated disagreements with his supervisor and in the natural course of events his supervisor should be the last person on earth to recommend him for promotion. Finally, Steve is of Scottish ancestry and a fiercely independent man. It irked him to be under obligation to a man he mistrusted and disliked, so he declined the promotion on the ground that he is happy where he is and dislikes being uprooted."

"Doesn't the fact that you, voluntarily and at your own and your neighbors' expense, have established an aerial patrol after the Army Air Service patrol was withdrawn, make you popular in Washington?"

"I think it helps. My service is known there. Unfortunately, however, I have a slightly shady record behind me."

Gail's face showed her amazement, but she was too well-bred to ask for particulars. Purdy ate in silence for a couple of minutes and then resumed: "Recently somebody remembered that record and sent it where it would do the most good."

"Do they hope to use it as the sound basis for an excuse to get an undesirable character off the Cuyamaca Reserve?" Gail asked.

He smiled faintly. "I dare say."

"And when I heard about it," Hallie spoke up triumphantly, "I sent certified copies of Lee's war record —his citations, letters of commendation from his commanding officers—everything. And I wrote a letter to the Forestry Chief, too."

Her brother beamed upon her. "Yes, and you were

unnecessarily belligerent," he reminded her. "Had you been able to travel you would have taken the first train to Washington to see the President about it."

"I couldn't," Hallie admitted, "so I wrote to the President, and after he had investigated he wrote me that while he was in office Lee Purdy would not have his grazing permit revoked. So there! If I hadn't done it, Miss Ormsby, it wouldn't have been done. Lee is so stupid about such things."

"Hallie dear," he reminded her gently, "soldiers and gentlemen never refer to their war records as a reason for being given greater consideration than those who have no war records. In fact, they do not refer to them at any time, and you must never do such a thing again, Hallie."

"Oh, I'm a Purdy, even if I'm a half-portion Purdy! When I get into a fight I never disdain any weapon handy."

He chuckled as she flung his words of a few minutes previous in his face. "The whole thing probably is a mare's nest," he declared lightly, and shifted the conversation to another subject. As they rose from luncheon he remarked that he was going to fly down to Arguello for the mail and would be back before dark. "I'll leave you in charge of this little insurgent," he said to Gail.

But Gail knew that his excuse for going to Arguello had been advanced merely to hide his real mission. He wanted to see that wounded man from San Onofre. She sensed that something she had said to him had aroused his suspicions; that he could not rest until he had set those suspicions at rest.

The mechanician, Tommy, was at the wheel of the two-seater with Purdy in the observer's seat as the plane roared over the Enchanted Hill and disappeared in the blue haze to the southeast. Lee Purdy's hands were bruised and swollen, from his combat with Jake Dort; he found difficulty in opening and closing them now and feared he might fumble the controls; also, for aught he knew, he might be flying in the face of Providence and in a pinch Tommy would stand back to back with him.

They landed in a field on the outskirts of Arguello and together walked over to the hospital. At the office Purdy learned that Bud Shannon was holding his own, but, because of excessive loss of blood, a blood transfusion would be necessary to save his life.

"Any candidates for the job?" Purdy's manner was very casual.

The nurse shook her head. "He is a stranger here and nobody is interested, Mr. Purdy."

"You're wrong. I am. I'll donate. My blood's pure enough for anybody, but suppose you test it first. Where's the laboratory?" He was removing his coat as he spoke; he was rolling up his shirt-sleeve as, in obedience to the nurse's instruction, he followed her down the hall to the laboratory.

"How long must I wait in town before your test is completed?" he asked the doctor.

"Well, we could rush it through in about four hours," the latter replied, "but in the case of the man Shannon we cannot wait that long. He'll blink out in two hours, so we'll have to risk infecting him with whatever microbes you may be carrying in your blood

stream. Shannon strikes me as not particularly an ornament to society; your blood ought to be too good for him."

"I know I'm O.K., Doctor. Let's go."

The grayness of death was on the killer's face as Lee Purdy bent over him. "Hello, Bud," the latter saluted him. "I got you into this fix, so it's up to me to get you out."

The blood transfusion was made in Shannon's room, and the gray shadows stole away from the killer's cold face as the hot, healthy blood of the man he had tried to murder for hire coursed through his depleted veins.

They gave Bud Shannon a pint—and that was enough! Of that Purdy was cognizant as he stood erect when the ordeal was over.

The doctor, observing Purdy's weakness, promptly assumed the prerogative of his profession. "I have a bed for you, Purdy. You will have to rest for a day or two until your body manufactures some more blood."

"My dear man, I have lost far more blood than that on more than one occasion, and I kept on going. I had to."

"That's different. You do not have to now—and besides you're not so young as you used to be."

"I have things to do tomorrow morning. I'll rest here tonight and in the interim, Doc, try to reduce the swelling in my hands. Tommy"—turning to the pilot who had remained in the room—"you fly home now and tell Miss Hallie not to wait dinner for me, but do not tell her why. Come back at daylight tomorrow and take me home. Don't forget to call for the mail."

About three o'clock that afternoon Pete Howe set Jake Dort down in front of the Arguello Hospital and tossed a trunk and a bedding roll out on the sidewalk. The parting between the range boss and the Box K rider was not demonstrative.

"Well, I hope you enjoy my job, Pete."

"Never asked for it or expected it," Pete Howe retorted doggedly.

"You must have done somethin' to win the queen's favor." For Jake Dort the day had been long, arduous and replete with sad disappointments; he desired greatly to quarrel with somebody.

"Don't git dirty, Jake," Pete Howe pleaded. "You been licked bad enough for one day and I don't aim to take on no cripples myself."

Jake sighed. "I'll be givin' orders to you again inside a week," he promised. "You're feeling high an' mighty now, Pete, but just wait till Ira Todd gets back on the ranch."

"I suppose you're goin' in to see the boss now an' explain how come yore face is on upside down," Pete suggested witheringly, "an' how come you've lost yore job."

"Anyway, I'm layin' you ten to one them cattle stay in the winter pasture," Jake growled. "I got a ace or two up the sleeve o' my kimono yet."

"Jake," Pete Howe replied severely, "you're more or less of a buzzard to make war on a lady. I'm here to tell you to quit it or I'll make you right hard to catch. Hear me? I'm the range boss of the Box K Ranch, whether I git paid for it or not, and the owner's battle is my battle."

"Ira will give you your time the minute he gets back to the ranch."

"Ira'll be lucky if somebody don't give him his time first."

"*A-a-g-g-h!*" snarled Jake. He waddled wearily up the steps and into the hospital. Pete Howe glowered after the bulky retreating form and pondered for a minute, then drove around to the drug store where there was a public telephone station. He called the Purdy ranch and asked for Miss Ormsby.

"This is Pete Howe, your new range boss," he announced when Gail's voice answered. "I've got rid of Jake Dort and I'm telephonin' now from Arguello. Jake's goin' to do his best to stop us from drivin' them cattle onto the government range. He's in the hospital now, singin' his song an' tellin' his story to Mr. Todd, an' I reckon you'd better see Mr. Todd right away an' have an understandin'. Jake talks big; he likes to listen to his own talk, but he'll do what Mr. Todd tells him to do."

"Oh, I'm so glad you telephoned, Mr. Howe! I'm sure I do not know what instructions to give you. But Major Purdy is at the hospital in Arguello now, visiting a sick friend. Please see him and be guided by what he tells you to do."

"I'll look him up right off, miss. I think most likely Jake will try attachin' your saddle stock to protect his claim for wages. That would block us from roundin' up the cattle, although in a pinch I reckon the Major would lend us a string o' horses. I might even get——"

"Hold the wire," Gail interrupted. "I hear the plane

returning. Major Purdy has probably returned in it. Wait!"

After a few minutes' delay Gail came on the wire again. "The Major still is at the hospital," she informed Pete Howe, "and I am coming in to Arguello in the plane with his pilot. I think you are quite right. I should see Mr. Todd at once."

"Then you might as well confer with Major Purdy yourself, miss, after you've talked to Mr. Todd. I'll mosey along back to the ranch. Good-by."

CHAPTER IX

AT HALF after four Gail, dressed as she had been when Purdy met her at San Onofre the day previous, knocked at the door of the hospital room where Ira Todd lay abed.

"Come in!" Todd called savagely. He was irritable, for his head ached prodigiously; also the soul within him was sore, for he had been publicly humiliated by a Chinaman not much larger than a fifteen-year-old white boy. He anticipated being made the recipient of much chaffing when he should emerge from the hospital.

Gail entered. Her manager lay in bed with his head swathed in bandages. A forty-eight-hour beard had accentuated an unusual pallor upon his stern face, markedly masculine, patrician, handsome. It rippled into a smile of welcome as Gail entered, and the girl marked his strong, even, beautiful white teeth—also the brown, powerful forearm terminating in a surprisingly small, well-shaped hand for one who, though he lay abed, impressed Gail instantly with his length, breadth and sinew. She had surprised a scowl on his face and it had not been a pleasant thing to see, but now his smile actually warmed her. He sat up in bed and reached for her hand.

"You're Miss Ormsby, I take it," he greeted her in a very pleasant voice that fairly rumbled from his great chest and seemed to fit the man perfectly.

"Yes, Mr. Todd. So glad to meet you, but so sorry to meet you here," Gail replied with equal cordiality, and advancing to the bedside accepted his proffered hand. Subconsciously she felt repelled at his handshake. It was without warmth or heartiness; his hand felt like some dead thing into which her hand had slipped. In all probability, she thought, he was a trifle awkward and embarrassed in the presence of the woman by whom he was employed.

A man rose from his seat on the opposite side of the bed and silently indicated the chair he had just vacated. The man was Jake Dort. "If you'll excuse me, ma'am, I'll be leaving you and Mr. Todd alone to discuss yore business," he announced, and left the room. "See you later," he called to Todd as the door closed behind him.

Todd smiled after him—a knowing smile without much humor or sympathy in it. "Jake tells me you and he have already gotten acquainted, Miss Ormsby," he said easily, and added parenthetically, "Jake is somewhat embarrassed."

"He isn't too pleasant to meet just now, Mr. Todd."

"Well, neither am I, for that matter. However, I think I feel better than Jake. From what he tells me he must have lost his rabbit's foot; seems like his luck has deserted him. He even tells me he's lost his job, Miss Ormsby."

Gail sat down and faced her manager. "Did he tell you why he lost it?"

Todd nodded. "Said he refused to obey your orders."

"That is true."

"I think, Miss Ormsby," Todd continued, with an odd, unexpected courtesy, "that Jake would have been glad to carry out your orders if you had given them to him yourself. Unfortunately you chose a channel he is not accustomed to and he resented that."

"If I had known he was the range boss of the Box K Ranch, I would have dismissed him when he headed a mob that came up to Major Purdy's ranch at daylight today, bent on lynching the Chinaman who assaulted you. I am quite certain Mr. Dort became impossible from that moment."

"I'm sorry, Miss Ormsby. Jake's a mighty good cow-hand. I can depend on him to get things done. And I can't help regretting you didn't wait to consult me before letting Jake out. It's going to be mighty embarrassing to Jake when folks learn that you fired him."

"But I didn't dismiss him. He resigned—under duress. His authority clashed with that of my agent and adviser, in your unavoidable absence—Major Lee Purdy. The Major used him rather badly, as Mr. Dort's face indicates."

"That was bad judgment on Purdy's part. He isn't popular with the Box K outfit and from today on I'd hate to stand in his boots."

"He appears to be a gentleman, Mr. Todd."

"He puts up a gentlemanly appearance, and I've heard he comes of a good family back East. But that lets him out. He's a black sheep and sooner or later he'll have to get out of this country. The cattlemen in these parts don't feel comfortable with Lee Purdy around."

Gail raised her fine eyebrows in polite interrogation. Todd continued.

"Would I be offending if I asked you how long you have known Purdy?"

"Certainly not. I met him at San Onofre yesterday afternoon when I alighted from the train there. He introduced himself and when you failed to appear, in accordance with your telegram, he informed me that you would not appear—and why. So I was forced to accept his invitation to ride with him. He was very nice indeed and put me up at his own home last night. His sister lives with him and she welcomed me. They are both extremely gracious, kind and hospitable, Mr. Todd, and I'm sure I do not know what I should have done if I had not met Major Purdy."

Ira Todd waved a deprecating hand. "I admit all that, Miss Ormsby. Just the same, it won't do you any good in this country to be known as an intimate friend of the Purdys. I don't know his sister and I take it she's all right, but I do know Purdy. Under those society manners of his he's a bad, bad *hombre*. So is his range boss, Link Hallowell, and Tommy Scaife, his mechanic. They're all three killers and it's common knowledge Purdy headed a cattle-rustling outfit along the Border for years. Nothing but the scads of money his folks spent at his trial in El Paso kept them out of the penitentiary in nineteen seventeen. They were tried twice and each time two men hung the jury. The third time the United States District Attorney dug up new evidence and would have convicted them sure, but Purdy's lawyer made a deal with the District Attorney and the Judge providing that if the United States Dis-

trict Attorney moved to dismiss the charges and the Judge concurred, Purdy, Hallowell and Scaife—all that was left of the gang—would join the army, get out of Texas and stay out. They were out on bail at the time, so they rode over to Fort Bliss with the Judge and enlisted. Then he dismissed the charges and released their bail."

"Are you certain of this, Mr. Todd?" Gail was inexpressibly shocked.

"I made a trip to El Paso to find out. The record is there in the District Court, and if you don't believe me, go down and read it yourself. You do not have to accept hearsay evidence, Miss Ormsby. I'm the last man on earth to convict a neighbor on idle gossip, but the indictments and records of both trials are there for anybody to read, and the Judge and the District Attorney will confirm my statement as to the agreement under which these three men were released. And you can see for yourself they've left Texas. They are now citizens of New Mexico!"

"Am I to infer that——"

"I ask you to infer nothing, Miss Ormsby. I merely state a condition. All I know is that there are half a dozen men along the Border who will kill Lee Purdy on sight."

Gail thought swiftly. "Was the man who tried to kill Purdy at San Onofre yesterday one of these Texas enemies?" She wondered.

"I've denounced Lee Purdy publicly ever since I went to El Paso and got the low-down on him," Todd continued sternly. "I've called him a cow-thief and a killer to his face and not once has he had the courage to

resent it. I bawled him out in that Chink restaurant yesterday morning. The Chink wanted me to sit at the same table with him—the place was full up at the time and that was the only vacant seat. I had my eye on him, waiting to see if he'd have the manhood to draw his gun, when his friend the Chinaman put me to sleep. I was unconscious all day, and that is my excuse for failing to meet you at San Onofre, Miss Ormsby."

Gail was confused, humiliated at the position in which—provided her manager's tale was true—her acceptance of the Purdy hospitality had placed her. Again she had a vision of the wounded man at San Onofre, of Lee Purdy's agile leap to the shelter of the automobile when her footsteps startled him; of the lightning-like swiftness with which his hand had flashed to his gun. She remembered his coolness, his near-impudence, his easy-flowing conversation on all subjects save himself and his affairs. She recalled the appearance of the man in the airplane, his mysterious message, coded through the exhaust of the motor, the visit of the mob in La Cuesta Encantada to claim the Chinaman.

Could it be possible that for a long time the countryside had for good and sufficient reasons cherished animosity against Lee Purdy and those who supported him and that the attack upon Todd had been the one thing necessary to prod them into an action calculated to impress Purdy with the knowledge that here, in this country, he must behave or take the consequences?

She pictured that comfortable hacienda on the Enchanted Hill, the simple but refined furnishings of it,

the easy hospitality of Purdy and his invalid sister, the undeniable atmosphere of good breeding that distinguished them both, certain indications of world wealth and position that were incongruous with this land of loneliness, of primitive passions and prejudices. She recalled the cool and casual manner in which Purdy had received Jake Dort and his would-be lynchers, the firm, fast manner in which he had humbled the mob, the ease with which, later, he had dismissed the incident as one of no importance whatsoever.

And there, too, was his army service, his medals and citations of which Hallie had spoken so pridefully, his own evidence of good breeding in the gentle reproof he had visited upon Hallie for referring to his army record. Gail had difficulty visioning Lee Purdy standing tamely under insult or assault. The cheerful alacrity with which he had disposed of Jake Dort at the Box K Ranch gave the lie to Todd's charge of a lack of courage.

"Major Purdy did not speak ill of you, Mr. Todd. In fact, he was rather complimentary in his references, although of course he did not scruple to admit that he disliked you intensely and that you disliked him."

"Did he say why I disliked him?"

"Yes, but for a different reason from the one you advance."

"Naturally." Todd smiled triumphantly and Gail felt humbled. But still she fought on. "I cannot conceive of Major Purdy as a man devoid of sufficient pride to defend his honor; nor as a man without courage."

"Miss Ormsby, when a man has parted with his honor he has already parted with his manly pride. His

conscience, in such matters, makes a coward of him, Purdy cannot disprove the charge against him. In his heart he knows it is true, that he was a mighty lucky fellow to beat the case as he did, and he hasn't the courage to do to me what an innocent man would do—and that is, pull and shoot his detractor if the said detractor did not publicly eat his words. That is the masculine code in this cattle country, Miss Ormsby, and the meanest white man will observe it or move on."

"But his army record, Mr. Todd. He has been decorated for bravery."

"I can well believe that. More than one ex-convict, unconvicted burglar and cold-blooded murderer won a Distinguished Service Cross in the late war. Nearly all men possess that kind of courage and those who have high-grade intelligence with it do bravely intelligent deeds. Purdy is no man's fool."

"What is his early history?" Gail demanded. She felt faintly nauseated.

"He comes of a fine old New England family. They're very rich and they've always had it. Lee Purdy was the black sheep and his people gave him money to go West, lose himself and cease disgracing them close to home. The next known of him he came out of Mexico two jumps ahead of a firing squad. Old Whiskers Carranza had proscribed him as an undesirable alien. He was broke and took a job as cook on the round-up of the Pecos Land and Cattle Company. He got into trouble on the round-up and killed one of the riders in a petty quarrel."

"Oh, no!" Gail's face went white, her voice was almost a whisper.

"He roped the man, jerked him off his horse an dragged him to death. The man's name was Lon Ortega. He was a half-breed Mexican, one of the least-considered riders of the outfit. Your new range boss, Pete Howe, was working on the Pecos round-up that year and saw Purdy do it."

"But—but—it—might have been done in self-defense," Gail pleaded.

"It wasn't. They'd had a couple of little run-ins at the chuck wagon, Ortega complaining of Purdy's poor cooking and poking fun at his method of using the English language. Purdy called him a mongrel pup and slapped him over an acre of ground, and Ortega ran to his bedding roll to get his gun. Purdy was unarmed, so he forked a pony belonging to Pete Howe and tried to get away. Ortega mounted, took out after Purdy and emptied his gun at him without results; Purdy counted the shots and when the sixth bullet lifted his hat off, he turned his horse, roped Ortega before he could reload and dragged him a mile as fast as Pete Howe's pony could hoof it.

"There wasn't anything done about it, but Purdy had to quit the outfit because there was no need of his killing Ortega. The man's gun was empty and he was harmless. Purdy could have beaten him up and the range boss would have fired Ortega, who would have gone away and eventually forgotten it. Ortega had never hurt anybody in all his life. He was a good boy and he hadn't meant any harm kidding Purdy. He was about the only man on the round-up that anybody could manhandle with ease, so Purdy manhandled him. Naturally Ortega lost his temper and ran for his gun.

Any man that was half a man would have done the same."

"It doesn't seem possible Major Purdy can be that sort of man," Gail quavered.

"I tell you he's a bad *hombre*, Miss Ormsby. Why he shot somebody up down at San Onofre yesterday. The man's in hospital here right now, the doctor tells me. That man Purdy's as peevish as a parrot."

"Major Purdy told me the man was a hired killer."

"I don't believe it. The man's probably one of those Texans who's been looking for Purdy ever since he got out of the army. By the way, I forgot to tell you that for a while Lee Purdy was a Texas Ranger, and as a Ranger he never took any chances. He killed his man first and arrested him afterward. The last poor devil he bumped off in Laredo had relatives and they swore to get Purdy, so he resigned from the Rangers and disappeared. The cowardly pup!"

"I do not believe he is cowardly, Mr. Todd. I saw him handle Jake Dort and his mob as if they had been so many bad little boys."

"Any fool could do that, with Jake's men all lined up and a machine gun trained on them. He knew blamed well that all somebody had to do was to make a suggestion that they lynch *him*—and it would have been done. He was protecting his own skin, Miss Ormsby, and not the Chinaman's. And what sort of white man would associate with a Chinaman anyhow?"

Gail was silent, overwhelmed by this indictment which her manager had brought against her host. Todd, watching her keenly, went on.

"I told you Purdy, Link Hallowell and Tommy

Scaife all joined the army together. Hallowell didn't like aviation, so he transferred to the field artillery. Scaife, who has a mechanical turn of mind but very little education, became a motor mechanic and learned to fly, but never got further than working around an aerodrome in France. Purdy liked flying and went to France as a sergeant. He came home a major. After the war they came together again. Link Hallowell is Purdy's range boss and Tommy Scaife is Purdy's motor mechanic right now at La Cuesta Encantada. Birds of a feather flock together, and the reason they do is because there's safety in numbers. Scaife or Hallowell are always with Purdy wherever he goes."

"Were they with him when you met him in the Chinaman's restaurant, Mr. Todd?"

"No, he was alone that time—for a wonder. But then it was shortly after daylight and Purdy had driven in to join his drive down to San Onofre. He wasn't expecting to meet me."

"Was he armed, Mr. Todd?"

"He's always armed. Carries his artillery in a shoulder holster under his left arm——"

"Were you armed?"

"Yes-s!"

"Where do you carry your gun?"

"On my hip, where men can see it."

"Why did you go out of your way to quarrel with Major Purdy? Suppose he is all you say he is. If he indicates a desire to behave himself—to mind his own business—why not permit him to do so in peace?"

"He accumulates cows too fast to suit me. We think he has a cute habit of claiming unbranded yearlings he

finds running with cows that wear your brand and the brands of other people. We haven't been able to hang anything on him yet, but if we ever do—good night, Major Purdy!"

Again Gail was silent. Todd saw that he had impressed her. He continued. "I'm the last man in the world to quarrel with my neighbors, Miss Ormsby. I started working for the Box K Ranch, under your Uncle Aleck, when I was seventeen years old—just out of high school. I was raised down in Santa Fe and I thought it would be fun to learn the cattle business. I liked it and I stuck. Your Uncle Aleck liked me and trusted me, and during the last five years of his life, when your uncle wasn't well enough to take care of things himself, I ran everything. He paid me mighty well and he let me accumulate a little bunch of cattle under my own brand. I ran them on the government range and rented winter pasturage from your Uncle Aleck, until Purdy came along and bought the winter pasturage I was renting.

"He's got some sort of pull in Washington—makes a great to-do about patrolling the Cuyamaca Reserve at his own expense—and he's just naturally hogging the government range. One after the other he's managed to have the grazing permits of the small cattlemen canceled, or else he's bought them out or bluffed them out and taken over their permits. The Box K permit and mine are two he can't get, because he can't bluff me or scare me or hang on me any charge which would give the rangers cause to advocate the cancellation of my permit or that of the Box K Ranch.

"Miss Ormsby, I've been fighting your battle ever

since your uncle died and left you the Box K Ranch, and that's the reason I'm here in this hospital. Purdy, profiting by my misfortune, made your acquaintance under circumstances where you found yourself forced to accept his friendly advances and the temporary hospitality of his home."

Todd sat up in bed and pointed an accusing finger at the girl. "Miss Ormsby, have Purdy and his sister asked you to stay with them while you are in this country?"

Gail nodded.

"I knew they would! They did this, of course, after showing you the Box K Ranch and pointing out the impossibility of any lady's living in such a place."

"It's a terribly lonely, desolate and not very clean place, you must admit, Mr. Todd."

"And for that reason you have accepted their invitation?"

"Well, yes."

"I'm sorry you should think I would be so indifferent to your interests as to suggest your putting up—alone—at the ranch. I had arranged to have you live with Jim Presbery and his wife, over at San Simeon. That's only six miles from your ranch. San Simeon is just a general store, a post-office, a blacksmith shop and the headquarters of the ranger service in the Cuyamaca Reserve. Presbery is the supervisor in charge and his wife is a charming woman. They have a very nice room and bath for you, and I would have sent over a couple of fine three-gaited saddle-horses for you and given you the ranch automobile and one of the boys to act as your chauffeur. It isn't a very fancy

automobile, I'll admit, and the chauffeur wouldn't wear a uniform on a bet, but it would get you around to attend to your business."

There was a note of genuine regret in Ira Todd's deep musical voice; a shade of sadness and disappointment had settled over his face; he gazed out of the window into the distance and was silent for at least a minute.

"Well," he said finally, "what can't be cured must be endured. You have accepted their hospitality, so I suppose you can't reject it now without embarrassment. And yet it's most embarrassing to me and to your own financial interests for you to stay on there. We're mighty hard up as matters stand, and if the money market and the market for beef cattle don't change for the better pretty soon, Purdy will get us anyhow. But that isn't his way. He's like all killers and crooks—too nervous to play a waiting game. He's got to crowd his luck while I'm flat on my back and unable to do anything. . . . Well, I'll not be here more than a week longer and when I get out we'll have a definite show-down. This last job he's tried to put over cooks his goose with me."

He shifted his sad gaze from the blue mountains visible through the hospital window and turned on her accusingly.

"Without consulting me—your own manager, the man your uncle trusted for fifteen years and made money doing it—you have let this slick crook take control of your affairs. He put you up to firing the best and most loyal range boss in all New Mexico—and you did it. He put you up to rounding up all your

cattle now on the winter range and shooing them out onto the government range to drift a hundred miles or so this summer, and all on the theory that it's the only thing to do to keep the Southwestern Cattle Loan Company from foreclosing the mortgage they hold on the Box K cattle. And you fell for it and ordered Pete Howe to start the drive tomorrow morning. And Purdy's going to send down his cook and chuck wagon and men to help. Do you know why? Because he wants this job put over in a hurry. He knows delays are dangerous. He knows he must act while I am lying here helpless."

Gail stared at her manager, frightened and a bit abashed. Todd stormed on. "The cattle loan company will *not* foreclose. Of course they say they will and I don't deny that at times they feel they'd like to and say so, but they'll think better of that. If they don't, I have ways to make them. *What Purdy wants you to do is to turn your cattle adrift and have them work up into the Cuyamaca Reserve a couple of weeks ahead of the official opening of the grazing season.* Then his friends, the rangers, will jump us for violation of our grazing permit and this will give Purdy's pull in Washington a chance to work. They will cancel our grazing permits immediately; we will be ordered to get our cattle out of the Reserve—and that will be an expensive job.

"Meanwhile Purdy will have secured our grazing permits. Then he'll buy our equity in the cattle for just enough money to enable us to get out of the country, and he'll have the loan company in such a position that it will have to carry the paper until fall.

By that time the market will be up, the cattle will be worth twenty dollars a head more than they are now and it will mean a nice profit for Mr. Purdy, and ruin for Miss Gail Ormsby and Mr. Ira Todd. After that Mr. Ira Todd can look for another job and Purdy will be able to buy the Box K Range for about four dollars an acre, although it's worth ten."

"Oh, I'm sure you're wrong, Mr. Todd!" Gail protested. "I can't believe that of Major Purdy."

"I didn't think you would, Miss Ormsby. Why should you? You know him better than you know me. He's been running the Box K Ranch twelve hours and I've only been running it five years. Are you going to send your riders down on the Rio Hondo tomorrow to make that drive?"

"I—I—don't know," Gail faltered.

"You've got to know and know here and now, Miss Ormsby, because I can't get out of this bed and straddle a horse to keep you from making a fool of yourself and me. Right now I can hardly see you and my head is just one big ache; I'm a bit paralyzed down one side; you may notice my speech is a little thick?"

Gail nodded. She had noticed that.

"I've got myself to think of—since you won't think of me now that I'm down and out when I'd ought to be up and doing. I've got about three hundred head under my own brand on the Box K winter range and I wish you wouldn't run them in with yours. You've got to decide here and now whether Ira Todd or Lee Purdy is manager of your range, and if Purdy is dictating its policy, my resignation is not only in order—you have it! What's the answer, Miss Ormsby?"

He was a powerful, forceful man and Gail realized that he had argued well and forcibly. He was not a man to be denied, and certainly he had not spent much time beating about the bush. To Gail, in her extremity, came an old maxim of the bridge-playing fraternity—"When in doubt, lead trumps!" Lee Purdy might be worth the odd trick, as the highest of a suit, but Ira Todd was certainly looming before her in all the glory of a trump. It seemed to her that she had to play him.

"You are the manager of the Box K Ranch, Mr. Todd," she decided.

"Thank you for that vote of confidence. As your manager, I do the hiring and the firing. Understood?"

Gail bent her head.

"Thank you again. Jake Dort is your range boss again, Miss Ormsby. I need him in your business and I need him tonight. He is probably sitting in the waiting-room now. Will you be good enough to ask him to step up here?"

Gail's face burned, but she faced the embarrassing issue bravely. She summoned Jake Dort, who came and stood, hat in hand, beside the manager's bed.

"Jake," said Ira Todd, "you go over to the sheriff's office and tell him you want to be made a deputy sheriff. He'll swear you in. Then you get the justice of the peace to issue a writ of attachment on all of the saddle-horses of the Box K Ranch to secure a suit you're going to enter against Miss Ormsby for wages overdue. After that get somebody to motor you out to the ranch and serve that writ on Pete Howe. Then, as the deputy sheriff in charge of the attached prop-

erty, camp on the job and wait until I come home and relieve you. If Purdy or any of his people come on the ranch while you are in charge, forget that you are a deputy sheriff and remember that once more you are the range boss of the Box K Ranch. Do whatever your judgment dictates. Miss Ormsby has no more orders to give you, and if she changes her mind and gives any, come and tell me."

"There won't be no drive of Box K cows tomorrow mornin', Iry," Jake promised. "I never yet seen a cow-hand that was worth shucks when it come to footin' it after a wild-doggie." He chuckled pleasurably, favored Gail with a malevolent and triumphant look and, still looking at her, deliberately bit a huge piece out of a plug of chewing tobacco. He continued to look at her unwinkingly as he returned the plug to his pocket. Without asking permission he removed from the bedpost where it hung Ira Todd's belt with a holster attached and a pistol in the holster. He counted the cartridges in the belt, nodded his satisfaction at the number and buckled the armament around his fat waist. "Sort o' looks like the Box K ain't quite big enough for me an' Pete Howe," he murmured musingly, and disappeared through the door.

Gail's eyes glowed with anger, her face went alternately red and white. "This is not an easy thing for me to do, Mr. Todd," she reminded her manager.

"It wouldn't be so hard if you had called to see me before committing yourself," he replied with spirit. "And up till now I haven't been having such an easy time of it myself. When will you leave Purdy's?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"You are very wise. I'll have a light motor truck go out from Arguello to move your baggage. You can ride on the front seat with the driver. Tell him to take you to San Simeon, and when you get there introduce yourself to Jim Presbery and his wife. They'll make you very comfortable. In the meantime, just so you won't worry, I have some news for you. That's my coat in the closet yonder. There's a telegram in the inside breast pocket. Read it."

Gail obeyed. The telegram was signed by the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation, dated that day from Santa Fe, and informed Ira Todd that the board of directors had agreed to extend the note of the estate of Alexander Garnett until November first.

"Now, don't get the idea in your head that I'm not fighting for your interests, Miss Ormsby," Todd advised her smilingly. "As I told you, these money-lenders get frightened sometimes and get wild notions in their heads. They had me frightened a week ago, but when I got my nerve back I ran over to Santa Fe and made them agree to reconsider. They wired me today that they had reconsidered, so now, you see, there isn't the slightest necessity for playing into the hands of the foxy Major Purdy."

Gail was indeed tremendously relieved. However, she had other worries.

"I am given to understand, Mr. Todd, that the ranch account in the local bank is overdrawn and that the hands at the ranch have not had any wages for three months."

"That is true," he admitted. "Life hasn't been very easy for us cowmen for quite a while back. But while

I was in Santa Fe the day before yesterday I raised a personal loan at the bank there. I had the money in my pocket for the pay-roll when that Chink hit me. Jake has it in his pocket now and the hands will be paid tomorrow."

Gail was overwhelmed. "Forgive me, Mr. Todd, if I have seemed to doubt you," she pleaded. "I am not a business woman, I was bewildered. I had to have advice from somebody that knew and I so wanted to trust somebody. So I trusted your enemy. Please forgive me."

"Oh, nonsense, Miss Ormsby! There's nothing to forgive, and if there was you've corrected your mistake. Hereafter, when you want to trust somebody, please trust me. I'm used to it." He smiled archly at her and held out his hand; this time his handclasp was more cordial.

He continued, "I promised your Uncle Aleck as he lay dying that I'd stick by you and get you out of the woods. He knew it wasn't going to be any easy job to do and he was worried."

"I'll not make your task harder for you, Mr. Todd. And I'm glad I came in to see you. Our discussion has been very illuminating."

"You are very kind to say that. I thought it had been very distressing. But I had to expose Purdy. As a usual thing I do not like to dig up any man's buried past, and I wouldn't in Purdy's case if I thought the scoundrel had reformed. But he hasn't. By the way, I have carbon copies of all the testimony, the indictment and in fact all of the records in those two trials of Purdy, Hallowell and Scaife, together with a letter

from the United States District Attorney at El Paso transmitting the documents to me. I'll send them over to Jim Presbery's for you to read at your leisure."

"Thank you. May I have this telegram?"

"What do you want it for?"

"To show to Major Purdy as a reason for calling off the arrangements he has made to assist Pete Howe in that drive tomorrow morning."

"I reckon it will help to let you down easy," Todd agreed, with ready wit. "Let me have it again, for the ranch files, when it has served its purpose. How are you going to get back to La Cuesta Encantada?"

"I'm going to fly back with Tommy Scaife."

"Good luck to you, Miss Ormsby. Good afternoon, and thank you for calling. I feel a lot better now."

"So do I, Mr. Todd. Good afternoon."

CHAPTER X

GAIL tucked the telegram in her hand-bag and left the room. Straight down the hall she went until she met a nurse, to whom she confided her desire to see Major Lee Purdy. Purdy was accordingly summoned from Bud Shannon's room, where he had been sitting watching the killer beat back to life.

"This is a very pleasant surprise, Miss Ormsby, although Tommy was in and told me I might expect you. You have been calling on Ira Todd, I take it." He led her into the deserted reception room.

"I have," Gail replied.

At the sound of her voice Purdy's eyes widened a little, their gaze became focused on hers. In her tone his alert intuition had detected a change in her mental attitude toward him. "Well?" he queried finally. Then, "Won't you be seated?"

Gail accepted the chair he offered her. "We had a long talk, Major," she replied, "and as a result of our conference I have concluded to retain Mr. Todd as my manager—for the present at least."

Purdy inclined his head in acquiescence, but his questioning eyes never ceased their questioning. "This telegram will explain the situation now existing," she continued, and handed him the message. He read it and handed it back. "Of course," Gail continued, a little eagerly, as if she desired to terminate the conversation

at the earliest possible moment, "this attitude on the part of the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation renders unnecessary the premature movement of my cattle onto the forest reserve, so I have agreed with Mr. Todd that we will keep them where they are until the official opening of the grazing season."

"I see. Well, it's nice to have such comforting assurance in writing," Purdy replied gravely. "I suppose you desire me to understand that I am relieved of my office as your adviser?"

Gail flushed but met his cool glance bravely. "Yes," she replied.

Followed an awkward silence. Gail was entirely at a loss for words to break it tactfully. She realized that she must present some reason for her unexpected call upon him; she realized also from his polite but stubborn silence that he expected her to present an explanation and was patiently awaiting it. In all her life she had never been placed in such an embarrassing predicament. Purdy saw that she was suffering, however, and he had not the hardihood to permit that.

"Tommy is waiting for you over by the ship, and I think you had better be running along, Miss Ormsby, so he can make his landing on the Enchanted Hill before dark. Please explain to Hallie that I am detained here on business and tell Tommy it will not be necessary for Joaquin and the riders to go down on the Hondo tomorrow morning."

She was grateful to him for the avenue of escape he offered her but she was not the kind to retreat ignominiously. Her glance faltered and fell before the inquiry that shone still in his cool blue eyes.

"I suppose Todd told you all about me?" he shot at her then.

"He confirmed your own admission to me this morning that you had a past," she replied, with increasing embarrassment.

"I suppose he painted a lurid picture."

"I'm so sorry, Major, but the things he told me, if true——"

"What did he tell you?"

"He said you were the black sheep of your family and——"

"I am."

"That formerly you were a member of the Texas Rangers and had a habit of killing your men before arresting them."

"I did that once, Miss Ormsby."

"He said you had quarreled with a cowboy named Ortega in Texas, lassoed him and dragged him to death."

"That is quite true, Miss Ormsby."

"He said you had been the leader of a gang of cattle thieves along the Mexican border for years."

"That's how I got my start in the cattle business, Miss Ormsby—stealing cattle from the Mexicans."

"He told me that you, a Mr. Hallowell and Tommy Scaife had been tried twice in El Paso for your crimes, and that your father's money was all that saved you from the penitentiary."

"That is true."

"He said two men hung the jury at each trial and the assumption was that they hung it for hire."

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to admit that, because

that would be fastening a crime on somebody else, but I will admit that on both occasions those jurors got on that jury for the sole purpose of hanging it, whether they were paid for it or not."

"They would have tried you a third time if you hadn't made a deal whereby all three of you agreed to enlist and get out of Texas."

"We accepted the program, Miss Ormsby, and agreed to leave Texas."

"Have you changed since those days, Major Purdy?"

He smiled wistfully. "I'm still operating under the same old code of morals, if that's what you mean."

"It is what I mean and I'm very sorry. You could be such a splendid man if you cared to be." Her voice faltered, tears welled into her eyes and trembled on her lashes.

"Please do not weep," he pleaded. "No man is quite worth that."

"It's smashed—all of what promised to be a fine friendship—and Hallie——"

"She'll get over it, Miss Ormsby."

Gail had opened her bag to get her handkerchief and dry the tears that were coming so much faster now. The mouth of the bag yawned open, disclosing the telegram she had showed him a moment before. Quite deliberately Purdy abstracted it and tucked it in his trousers pocket; all the while he was saying:

"I suppose this means you have made up your mind to leave La Cuesta Encantada."

Gail nodded and a sob escaped her. It hurt her terribly to have to tell him these things, after he and Hallie had been so kind to her.

"I had hoped we might have you for a week at least before the ghosts of my past drove you away. At first I wanted you as our guest for poor lonely little Hallie's sake—but now I'm sorry for my own sake that you're going. However, I realize you have to do it, so please do not feel badly about it."

"I can't—can't—help feeling badly," Gail wailed. "You and Hallie have been wonderful to me—and it's so embarrassing and terrible to have to tell her—and I loathe hurting you. It seems like such a gratuitous slap in the face in return for your wonderful hospitality, but—I——"

"Well, Hallie is all right," he defended stoutly. "I'm the kill-joy of the family. It's much too bad. However, do not bother to tell Hallie. Go away tomorrow morning before my sister arises. Then you'll not have to say sad good-bys and make embarrassing explanations. Leave all that to me. I'm used to explaining things," he added bitterly.

"You—you make—make it all the harder. You're such a—good—sport—for a—bad man. I'm sure—everything could be explained—if people would only —understand—and have some charity. I——"

"You're very sweet to say that and I shall be eternally grateful to you for it. Now dry your eyes and run along. Tommy is waiting and the light is fading fast."

She held out her little brown hand and he bent and kissed it reverently. "Good-by," she barely whispered.

"*Au revoir*," he murmured, slurring the words as he had learned to slur them during the one period of his life when he had turned perforce from his evil ways

to honorable service. "When you need some nine-minute eggs to do something for you, send for Lee Purdy, Link Hallowell and Tommy Scaife. We'll come a-running, Miss Ormsby. And that's a promise."

Gail stumbled blindly out of the hospital and across to the field where Tommy Scaife sat in the fuselage of Purdy's two-seater, smoking cigarettes. He hopped out now to give the girl a hand up and, her composure having in a measure returned, she took keen notice of Tommy Scaife for the first time.

He was a small, sturdy man, weighing about a hundred and forty pounds. He was slightly bow-legged —that degree of bow-leggedness which comes of a lifetime in the saddle; his hair was red and his eyes a buttermilk blue. He was freckled to a point where a frontier wit had once declared that Tommy's features reminded him of nothing so much as a nickel's worth of ginger snaps. He had a pug nose and a wide, generous, humorous mouth; there was that about him which gave Gail an impression that here was a little boy who had grown old much too quickly.

"Tommy Scaife," the girl demanded, acting on a sudden impulse, "what do you think of Major Purdy?"

"He'll *go*," the little man replied promptly. "I ought to know. I've gone with him."

"And what do you think of Mr. Ira Todd?"

"He's all right, I guess—in his way. It don't happen to be my way. When a man don't like another man he ain't qualified to pass judgment on him. I reckon your manager is like the rest of us—a little bit spotted."

"Have you ever been a cow-thief, Tommy?"

Tommy's buttermilk eyes flashed upon her a glance that made her quail. In all her life Gail had never seen anything so bleak as those eyes. "I see you've been discussin' me with Todd," he parried. "Well, that makes just one more indictment against that *hombre*."

"I just wanted to know," Gail explained. "I had heard that about you and yet you seem so honest and fair-minded I couldn't help thinking it wasn't true."

"I'll tell you something about that manager of yours," the little red man remarked evenly. "The Major never carries a gun. Todd knows he doesn't, so yesterday morning when he met the Major alone in the restaurant he felt free to abuse him; until the Chinaman took care of Ira Todd. But when Todd gets well you're going to have to hunt a new manager, miss. He tried to provoke the Major into striking him; then he would have killed the Major—and the restaurant filled with Todd's witnesses to prove self-defense. The Major, for his little sister's sake, had to sit tight and listen to things said about Miss Hallie. Todd got that low a-tryin' to provoke a killin'."

His bleak eyes roved over her.

"Well, he provoked a killin', all right," he continued. "I'll kill *him* as sure as death an' taxes—an' that the first time we meet. Tell him. Tell him to heel himself and get his killers together. He's got me an' Link Hallowell to reckon with. Tell your manager I shook dice with Link for Ira Todd, I won him fair an' square an' I play for keeps. I warned him to lay off the Major. So did Link. He wouldn't. Now nothin' but paralysis, complete an' total, can keep me off'n him.

You tell him that, miss, an' watch his face get white. He's afeared to die."

Gail realized that this fear was one that could never, by any possibility, come to Tommy Scaife. Whatever his faults he was one of the valiant few to whom the preservation of a code meant more than life, with private and secret dishonor. The girl looked once more into his bleak eyes and knew that, whatever the issue was to be, this man would decide it.

CHAPTER XI

ARRIVED at the hacienda, Gail was fortunate in being able to proceed directly to her room without encountering Hallie. Here she bathed her eyes and composed herself until Conchita appeared to announce dinner, when she joined Hallie in the dining-room and delivered to her her brother's message. The little invalid, observing that her guest was somewhat distrait, forbore to comment on it. She monopolized the conversation during dinner and immediately after dinner busied herself at the radio. Seemingly she was engrossed with the problem of catching a concert from a New York broadcasting station, and eventually she succeeded. For an hour the two girls sat listening, and then Conchita came to help Hallie to bed.

"Good night," Hallie said—and then, impulsively, she evaded Conchita and came straight to Gail's side. "I'm sorry you are unhappy tonight. I know you have your worries, but you mustn't permit them to distress you. Leave them to my brother. He and worry have more than a nodding acquaintance and —may I call you Gail? I want you to call me Hallie."

It was such a frank appeal to Gail for her friendship —for the comfort of her society. A great sympathy welled up in Gail's heart for the frail little thing, striving so gallantly to be loyal to her amazingly likable scalawag of a brother.

"You poor dear!" she said, took Hallie in her arms and kissed her wan cheeks.

Hallie, on her part, drew Gail's brown head down on her shoulder—she was taller than Gail—and whispered: "Now, cry all you want. You've been wanting to all evening, you know."

And Gail wept. When she had got control of herself again she felt better and Hallie queried timidly, "Do you mind telling me what it's all about, Gail?"

"It's because I'm going to leave La Cuesta Encantada in the morning, Hallie."

"Must you go? I'm so sorry."

"It appears that rooms have been engaged for me at the Presbery home in San Simeon. I'll be close to my ranch then. It will be more convenient for me to confer with my manager, Mr. Todd."

"I understand," said Hallie. "He and Lee do not like each other, and of course that would make it awkward for you. But you'll come and see me frequently, won't you? Tommy or Lee will fly over for you at any time you call up. You can get us over the Forest Service line. Ring two bells—one long and one short. I'd go over to visit you, but Mrs. Presbery has children and she's horribly afraid of tubercular people. Good night, dear."

She retired to her room, convoyed by the massive Conchita, and Gail, lonelier and more desolate than she could remember ever having been in all her life, sat down on the divan before the huge log fire and gave herself up to her melancholy thoughts.

For an hour she puzzled sadly over the mystery of Lee Purdy. If he had not admitted the truth of Ira

Todd's charges against him; if he had merely scorned to deny them, by his silence branding them ridiculous, she would have been moved to ascribe Todd's words to idle gossip. But that her host was a human anachronism she could no longer doubt; and presently, reacting from the sadness and disappointment incident to her discovery that he *was* an anachronism, her alert mind began to seek evidence of the extent of his anachronistic tendencies.

On each side of the fireplace stood five rows of shelves filled with books. Gail, rising, scanned the titles and discovered that in his literary tastes—for every volume she examined bore his book-plate—Lee Purdy was unusually catholic. Ancient and classical literature mingled with the most modern; the "Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini," General Grant's "Personal Memoirs," Darwin's "Origin of Species," Woodrow Wilson's "History of the American People," "Gulliver's Travels," Stanley's "In Darkest Africa," "The Oxford Book of English Verse," a special edition of the poems of T. A. Daly and a volume of Ernest Dowson's —these shouldered "Underground Timbering" by Ford, "Philippine Forestry" by Ahern, bound editions of the "Journal of the Hereford Cattle Breeders' Association of America," Professor Piper's "Swine Husbandry," "Breeding and Training of Cavalry Mounts" by somebody whose name was obscured by a blotch of ink, and a "Monograph on the West Highland Terrier" by Holland Buckley.

Gail continued to read the titles in the amazing list. There was "The History and Development of Internal Combustion Engines" by Pugh, Grassette's "The Semi-

Insane and the Semi-Responsible," a priceless original edition of Doughty's "Arabia Deserta," "Clinical Notes on the Treatment and Prevention of Intestinal Toxemia" by Lieb, Department of Agriculture bulletins on such diversified subjects as cotton farming, the boll weevil, immunization of hogs against hog cholera and hemorrhagic septicemia, and bovine tuberculosis; there was Daniels on "Landscape Gardening," the "Drummer's Joke Book," the Family Bible, the Koran, the "Analects of Confucius," and—Gail abandoned everything in favor of this— "A Genealogy of the Purdy Family, of Worcester, Massachusetts."

"Despite his busy life of crime," Gail reflected, "he has had time to read all these books, for they all seem to have been read. Still, he might be a patron of second-hand book-shops."

She composed herself under the reading lamp and in the "Genealogy of the Purdy Family, of Worcester, Massachusetts," sought eagerly for confirmation of her vague, preconceived hope that in a family old enough to possess such a bulky genealogy she was bound to uncover some refutation or explanation of Lee Purdy's dual nature.

It appeared that the record of the Purdy history commenced when one James Purdy, an archer, having lost his bow and arrows at the battle of Hastings, had without previous experience performed right well with spear and battle-ax. At any rate that day he started up the military heights and as captain of a company of archers some years later he foolishly accepted a challenge to fight a duel with rapiers. Returning from the field of honor feet foremost, he had been duly

buried with public and religious rites—the first Purdy to lift himself and the name out of the level of mediocrity.

His issue had married and fathered many children; they had lived undistinguished lives, fighting for their king or against him as the humor seized them. Some had died peaceably of old age; others in battle, two on a gibbet. Thomas Purdy had against his will emigrated to America. Condemned as a traitor, he had been sold into slavery to a Virginia planter. Thomas had solved his problem by refusing bluntly to remain a slave in Virginia, on the broad general principle that Britons never should be slaves. He ran away. Eventually reaching an inlet on the North Carolina coast, he came upon a pirate craft careened on the beach for painting, calking and repairing. A pirate was, in the opinion of Thomas Purdy, several degrees higher in the social scale than a slave. Moreover, Thomas owed His Britannic Majesty a grudge. So he joined the ship's company, rose to preeminence in the business of piracy, accumulated worldly goods and, as so frequently happened in those days, eventually was pardoned for his crimes and given a commission as admiral in the King's navy.

In his early fifties the ex-pirate had wed Sarah Pennington, of Providence, Rhode Island, who had borne him three sons, the eldest of whom, Benjamin, eventually had settled in the neighborhood of what is now Worcester, Massachusetts. The record from Benjamin on was that of the average early American family —a recital of marriages, births, deaths, Indian fights, service in all of the wars of the United States, election

to town councils, gradual rise to importance in the social, business and financial life of Worcester. Four generations of one branch of the family had pursued the business of textile manufacturing in Worcester; the present head of that particular branch, Jonas Isaac Purdy, father of Hallie and Leland Purdy, was the owner of the Purdy Mills.

He was sixty-six years old, according to Gail's computation, and had married, at twenty-six, Miss Abigail Monroe. Four children had been born of this union—David, now thirty-eight, Norris, now thirty-six, Abigail, thirty-four, and Leland, thirty-two. At his birth Lee Purdy's mother had passed away. Ten years later his father had remarried, taking to wife Hester Ambrose, the eldest daughter of a wealthy old Revolutionary family. Hallie, now approaching her nineteenth birthday, had been the sole issue of that marriage and her mother had died when Hallie was five years old.

So Lee Purdy was a half-brother to Hallie! Gail thought she could detect a reason for their devotion to each other. David had married at twenty-four, Norris at twenty-one and Abigail at nineteen. Concerned with their own domestic establishments and their own babies, they had not had time or opportunity to develop toward Hallie anything approaching the measure of affection which her relationship to them demanded. Lee had been about thirteen years old, however, when Hallie was born; he had been eighteen when her mother died and the lonely, delicate little thing had got closer to his heart, probably, than had the other members of the family. Then he had gone forth into

the world, to return at infrequent periods, with the glamor of adventure upon him. In Hallie's romantic eyes he had doubtless been a hero always.

In the very year of its establishment a Purdy had matriculated at Harvard University. Lee Purdy's grandfather and father had graduated from Harvard, but not Lee Purdy. He had broken the family tradition by attending a school of mines in Colorado. No further record of the master of La Cuesta Encantada came under Gail's eager, searching eyes, but in a large linen envelope pasted by the gummed flap to the reverse of the last page in the Genealogy, Gail found copies of all documents relating to her host's service in the Great War.

He had a record of eleven enemy airplanes, nine observation balloons, forty-seven aerial combats and two wound stripes. He held the Croix de Guerre and the medal of the Legion d'Honneur; the D. S. O. had been conferred upon him by His Britannic Majesty, King George V; he held the Distinguished Service Cross with a cluster of oak leaves, proving that he had won it twice; the Portuguese, Italians and Belgians had each decorated him for gallantry in action; and he had been tried, convicted and sentenced to dismissal from the service for conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman—to wit, publicly thrashing his superior officer.

This sentence had, upon the recommendation of the Commanding General of the Army, been disapproved by the President and a severe reprimand, published in general orders and read at retreat formation of his unit, together with a fine of one month's pay, had been

substituted for the sentence of the general court-martial. A memorandum, apparently in Lee Purdy's handwriting and pinned to this unsavory military record, explained that he had thrashed the Major in a moment of passion, superinduced by the inexcusable action of the latter, who had abandoned him in a dog-fight!

Gail closed the Genealogy. She understood her host now. He had bred back to his first American ancestor, Thomas Purdy, the pirate. Kind, affable, courtly, polite, with a certain measure of good breeding and refinement, an alert intelligence and a becoming sense of his responsibilities as a citizen, Lee Purdy might be, and undoubtedly was, until aroused. Thereafter he could with ease develop into a bold, bad, cruel, scheming, murderous devil. In a word he was a curious mixture of good and bad—a latter-day Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Had not his piratical ancestor died in sanctity? . . . Yes, Lee Purdy was a throwback.

CHAPTER XII

FOOTSTEPS echoed along the patio porch and down the hall, pausing at the door of the living-room. Gail looked up and found Tommy Scaife standing in the entrance, hat in hand, his face troubled and apologetic.

"Beg pardon, miss," he said. "I thought I'd take a quick look through the boss's library an' see if he's got anything on poison."

"I'm certain he must have," Gail replied. "He has everything else. What sort of poison are you interested in?" She had risen to replace the Genealogy and her bright eyes were already busy scanning the titles.

"I don't know," Tommy confessed. "Rory's poisoned, I think. Anyhow he's got froth on his lips an' he's having a convulsion."

"Poor fellow! What has he been eating? Why don't you ask him?"

"Rory's an Airedale terrier, miss."

"Oh! The symptoms incline me to think he has been given strychnine. Give him raw eggs and milk and follow with an emetic—mustard and water—a few minutes later."

"Thanks, miss." Tommy bowed and hastened away. Once outside the patio he ran to the bunk-house, routed out Joaquin, the cook, and demanded eggs and milk.

"*Por qué?*" Joaquin demanded. Like all of his leisurely kind he required always a substantial reason for bestirring himself, particularly after hours.

Tommy cursed him and bade him in Spanish to talk less and do more. Then, while Joaquin drew on his trousers and boots, Tommy explained that, having heard Rory barking furiously a couple of hundred yards from the house and over in the direction of the hangar, he had concluded the dog had crossed the trail of a skunk. Rory had a habit of nocturnal prowling. Skunks have this habit also and not infrequently Rory's barking at night had been but the prelude to his ignominious return, a disgrace to dogdom and an outcast from the free and easy society of the bunk-house until the odor of his encounter should have worn away. Fearful of the customary annoyance, therefore, Tommy had whistled to Rory, who thereupon had ceased his uproar and five minutes later had come to the door of Tommy's cabin and scratched Tommy had opened the door and Rory had fallen at his feet in a convulsion.

"This is an old tale on La Cuesta Encantada," quoth Joaquin. "Tomitito, there are enemies abroad." He buckled on a belt and six-shooter and went with Tommy Scaife to help the latter carry the dog to the kitchen for treatment. But they arrived too late. Rory lay outstretched on the floor of Tommy's cabin; as they entered his stumpy tasseled tail beat the floor feebly, and when Joaquin knelt and stroked the rough head with a kindly "*Pobre perro!*" Rory licked the swarthy wrist, essayed to get up, failed, sighed and died.

Joaquin and Tommy looked at each other. "Mees Hallie she's goin' feel preety bad, I theenk, Tomitito, no?" said the cook sorrowfully. "*Por la madre de Dios!* Eef I catch me those fella he's got the mean heart for poison one poor dog because he don' like the same man like the dog, I tell to you, I keel it."

"Some day, Joaquin—some day!" Tommy Scaife replied hopefully. "I don't so much mind what they do to Lee. He can stand it, but every time somebody sneaks up here and slips a meat ball with strychnine in it to one of our dogs, it sets Hallie Purdy back a month. May God damn that fiend's foul soul to the deepest hell!"

"I theenk mebbeso you better tell small lie, eh, Tomitito *mio?* You tell to the Señorita Rory she go weeth Tony to the Cuyamaca. When Tony she's come back you tell to the Señorita thees ol' fool Rory he's run away for leeve weeth the coyotes—you tell to him sometheeng—I don' care one leetle damn what he is—so mebbeso Mees Hallie she don' cry like leetle baby."

"That's not a bad idea, Joaquin. I'll have to warn Miss Ormsby not to tell her the dog has been poisoned."

He hastened down to the hacienda, entering the living-room just as the telephone in Purdy's office across the hall rang—three long bells and two short.

"Somebody callin' over the Forest Service line," Tommy informed Gail. "Wonder what's doing. Strange, at this hour o' the night——"

He went to the office and answered the telephone. Gail heard him say, at the end of five minutes' silence: "Very well, Jim. We'll be on the watch. Purdy's away. Tommy Scaife talkin'. You needn't mind ring-

in' up on this matter again, Jim. *Sabe usted?*"

He paused again at the door of the living-room. "Rory's dead," he informed her. "Please do not tell Miss Hallie. When she asks for Rory I'm going to lie to her. Good night, miss."

He returned to his cabin, where Joaquin was still sorrowing over the dead Airedale. "Just had a telephone message from Jim Presbery, the Assistant Supervisor at San Simeon," he told the cook. "He tells me Steve MacDougald was bushwhacked up on the Middle Fork of the Rio Hondo this morning. They found his body about sunset. Joaquin, I'm not going to leave the boss in Arguello all night. I'm afraid. Come on over to the hangar and help me run out my bus."

Joaquin swore feelingly in English and Spanish and followed after Tommy. At the door of the hangar the latter paused.

"I'm going to put a new padlock on this door tomorrow," he declared, "and when I do I'm going to file the number off the padlock. Whoever knows the number stamped on a Yale padlock can always buy the correspondingly numbered key to fit it, and whoever slipped Rory his medicine was monkeying around this hangar when the dog commenced barking at him. Now, what was he doin' here, I wonder? Did he come to poison dogs or jim up these ships? Or did he figure to poison the dogs first so they wouldn't give him away when he came back to jim the ships?"

"*Quien sabe?*" Joaquin replied, with a shrug. He disliked mysteries. They strained his powers of imagination.

Tommy Scaife, still growling under his breath, opened the hangar and turned on the electric lights, supplied from huge storage batteries into which a two-horse-power gasoline motor pumped "juice." In the hangar were three airplanes, two of them two-seaters and one a single seater—a combat plane. Tommy went carefully over the ship he had been flying that afternoon, testing all the wires and controls, examining the ignition and connections on the motor.

"Guess she's all right, Joaquin," he remarked and walked out to the end of the right wing. He struck one of the spruce struts a smart blow with the flat of his hand, paused, considering—and struck it again—harder. "Something doing here," he muttered. "She gives a little!" He ran his palm up and down the strut, then flashed a pocket torchlight on it. Satisfied with his examination, he went carefully over all the other struts while Joaquin stood by, watching him owlishly.

Tommy passed on to the next machine and examined that with equal care. Then he inspected the single-seater.

"O.K.," he announced. "We'll push out old Red Belly here," and he indicated the second plane he had inspected. Humming a tuneless improvisation, he moved briskly about, filling the motor with oil and the tank with gasoline; when he was ready to roll the ship out of the hangar he stepped outside, looked toward the east and noted a mellow radiance in the sky. The full moon would soon be up.

He returned inside the hangar, closed the doors and with a crook of his finger summoned the Mexican.

"Joaquin," he said, "we've had a visitor in this hangar. See here!" And he indicated the ship he had been driving that day. "He has sawed the two end struts on both wings practically two-thirds through and filled the crack made by the saw with beeswax, which is almost the same color as this wood. If I hadn't inspected the ship very closely I wouldn't have noticed the job. It's mighty neat."

"He do thees t'ing tonight?"

"No, by Judas, he didn't. He did it yesterday, and we've been flying this ship all day!"

"*Madre de Dios!*"

"We're fools for luck, Joaquin. Listen. I see it all now as clear as mud. I was working on the motor of the other ship all day yesterday—and I was the only man on the ranch. The boss, you, Link Hallowell and the riders had gone down to San Onofre with the cattle drive. About four-thirty yesterday afternoon I got this motor shooting on all six and concluded to take her up for a short flight—to test her.

"Just as I was hopping off Miss Hallie waved to me from her window and I thought, 'The boss has been gone two days. He will be anxious to know how the little one is feelin',' so I made up my mind to fly down to San Onofre and report to him. Half-way between Arguello and San Onofre I saw a car dustin' along the road, so I came down low an' sure enough it was the boss. I give him the horn an' when he got out an' waved at me, I wirelessed him with the exhaust, 'Hallie O.K.' Then I started back, developed ignition trouble an' had to land to tinker with it. Got fixed up and home again about twilight, but the point I'm making

is that I was gone an hour and a half—and I left this door open."

He looked smilingly at Joaquin. When anything had become perfectly clear to Tommy he always smiled. News, with Tommy Scaife, did not have to be good or bad, but definite and accurate. Joaquin scratched his blue-black head and tried to look vastly more intelligent than he was. Tommy resumed:

"The skunk just had time to do a neat, complete job before he heard my motor, homeward bound. So he just slipped out and into the brush yonder, where he lay low until I had landed and put up my ship. Then he vamosed. Tonight he came back to doctor the other ship—and Rory smelled him and warned him away. I, thinking Rory had a skunk, whistled to the dog, who concluded at once that everything was O.K. with me, so why should he raise a fuss with the stranger? He didn't. The chances are he came up to smell him and make friends—and that's where Rory used poor judgment."

Joaquin nodded, as solemn as an owl, and Tommy got into his leathern coat and helmet. "I'm going to fix that boy's clock for keeps," he declared. "He'll be back again tomorrow night, but he won't be traveling on a return-trip ticket. And I'll change that padlock right now."

Half an hour later, when the Enchanted Hill swam in the light of the moon now well up in the heavens, Tommy Scaife hopped off and headed for Arguello. Joaquin José Ramon Oreña y Sanchez stood in front of the hangar and watched him depart—and when the sound of the motor grew faint, Joaquin José Ramon

did a curious thing. From his trousers pocket he produced a six-inch section of round steel, which he had found on Tommy's work-bench; this steel he inserted in the claw of the padlock and twisted until the padlock fell apart. Casting the broken lock from him Joaquin slipped inside, climbed up into the fuselage of the remaining two-seater, drew his six-shooter and sat down to await the arrival of gifts such as the gods might provide.

He had not long to wait. Scarcely ten minutes had passed before his ear, alert as are the ears of all primitive peoples, detected a cautious crunching of the gravel in the rear of the hangar. Slowly the footsteps passed around to the front, where ensued a brief pause while the visitor reconnoitered. Apparently satisfied, from the absence of lights in any of the buildings on the Enchanted Hill, that everybody had retired, and confident that he would not be molested until the return of the man he had just heard fly away, the stranger entered the hangar and struck a match, seeking the electric-light switch. He found it, turned it on, looked up at the airplane which towered above him and——

"Rory," said Joaquin José Ramon Oreña y Sanchez in the soft sibilant accents of his mother tongue, "I dedicate this animal to you."

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN Gail Ormsby left the Arguello hospital Lee Purdy watched from the window until he saw the airplane, with its two passengers, rise over the squat, red-roofed adobe houses and soar away toward the Enchanted Hill. He followed its flight with musing gaze until, climbing, it disappeared from his ken.

He sighed sadly. "Another bright day-dream shattered," he soliloquized. "The fogs of illusion dissipated by the sun of reality. *Caramba!* Life grows interesting and complicated."

He went down the corridor to the room occupied by Ira Todd and rapped upon the door.

Todd's voice bade him enter. He thrust his head into the room first and glanced cautiously around—he had seen Jake Dort entering the hospital earlier in the afternoon. Todd was alone in the room, however, so Purdy entered and closed the door softly behind him.

At sight of his face Todd had started perceptibly. Now he cleared his throat twice. Lee Purdy, in his day, had known the same peculiar necessity for clearing his throat a couple of times before speaking. Fear does that and Lee Purdy had known fear and could understand it. Todd's voice was husky and not very convincing as he demanded:

"Well, Purdy, what do you want?"

"Oh, I just dropped in for a quiet, uninterrupted chat! By the way, your tongue is just a trifle out of control, isn't it? That rap on the head must have paralyzed some of the facial nerves." Todd nodded. "Little blood clot somewhere, I take it. Is the paralysis just starting or is it wearing away?"

"It's wearing away," Todd admitted.

"That's comforting, Todd."

Purdy sat down in the chair so recently vacated by Gail, lighted a cigarette, rested his right ankle over his left knee, laced his fingers behind his head, tilted back his chair and gazed long and interestedly upon his enemy. He did not speak and Todd's face commenced to twitch. He attempted to outstare his visitor, but failed, and appeared to discover something of interest on the darkening saw-tooth mountain-tops miles away. Purdy shifted his gaze to the ceiling and blew smoke rings. Finally:

"Well, Todd, it's a fine night for a murder, isn't it?"

Ira Todd's sickly face turned the color of a ripe Swiss cheese. He gulped and licked his lips, then tried to smile politely as if at a particularly feeble jest.

"It's so much nicer to be able to chat comfortably with you here," Purdy went on. "Two is company, three is a crowd, Todd. The presence of your witnesses always did tend to hamper my conversational style."

"I'm sick. I'm in no condition to talk to you, Purdy," Todd blustered. "You're not welcome here."

"I wasn't in any condition to talk to you in Chan's restaurant yesterday morning, Todd. I was alone and unarmed, but I didn't whine or look out the window or plead illness as an excuse for refusing to listen

to you. As I recall the incident, I ignored you, even when you spat in my face. By the way, Todd, that's an old, cheap killer's trick. I am amazed that you, who have never killed a man—at least openly—should have the courage to resort to that moth-eaten strategy. You hoped I'd reach for my handkerchief to wipe away your foulness and the movement toward my coat pocket would then have given you an excuse to construe my action as an attempt to draw a gun. I fooled you, didn't I?" Purdy's faint smile of contempt caused Todd to writhe. "It must have been a great disappointment to you when I raised my arm so very, very slowly and wiped away the spittle with my finger. And when that failed, you decried my sister's virtue by hinting broadly that she wasn't my sister. And still I ignored you."

"I wanted to show you up," Todd managed to say defiantly. "And I did just that."

"You are a consummate fool. You signed your own death warrant, Todd."

"Are you going to kill me now, when I'm unarmed and too helpless to defend myself?"

"Nothing so stupid as that, Todd. I thought you might like to know that Link Hallowell and Tommy Scaife shook dice with each other at San Onofre yesterday morning for the privilege of killing you. Tommy won."

"Interesting, if true," Todd murmured thickly.

"Tommy asked me to call upon you and inform you that unless you print, in the next issue of the Arguello Citizen, an abject and complete retraction of every dirty charge you brought against me in Chan's res-

taurant yesterday morning, he will kill you on sight."

"He's bluffing. Why don't you kill your own enemies, Purdy?"

"Tommy and Link object. Of course, it's really my job, but those confounded sentimentalists argue that I can't afford the luxury because of my invalid sister, and that it's up to me to be in position to bail Tommy out of jail and see that he gets a fair trial. It is well known that you have publicly given utterance to a statement which, to the New Mexico way of thinking, places you in the category of one who wants killin'. And it isn't customary, in this state, for juries to convict men who kill other men who 'want killin'.' But of course you know that. I don't have to tell you."

"Guess I'll have to have Tommy Scaife put under heavy bonds to keep the peace," Todd countered. His first fright over, he was regaining his composure.

Purdy blew another smoke ring. "Well, of course, in that case Link Hallowell will have to be considered, although Link hasn't made any threats nor has he sent you any message by me. Still, if I were you I'd consider Link an integral part of my social problem." He sighed deeply. "The yearning for peace is very strong in me, Todd," he continued. "I'll be content with a public apology, sworn to before a notary public. Just a plain blunt admission that you're a liar, Todd, and after that you will be free to depart in peace and never come back. How does the program strike you?"

"It doesn't strike me at all, Purdy. You know I can't do that."

Purdy shrugged. "You have the courage of an

egotistic coward, and I'm not so certain I prefer it otherwise. By the way, you've had quite a conversation with Miss Ormsby."

Todd actually grinned. "Sort of spoiled your game there, Purdy."

"Interesting, if true," Purdy replied laconically, "to quote your own recent words. She asked me if certain charges you had made against my honor were true and I admitted their truth. It wasn't easy to do, but I concluded one liar was enough in this hospital at one time."

The door had opened softly.

"Hello, Jake. I can see you in the mirror, so you'll pardon me, will you not, if I fail to turn around? Are you back on the Box K pay-roll, Jake?" Purdy queried socially.

"You bet," Jake Dort replied. "Vamose!"

"Hold your horses, Jake. I'm not going to vamose until I have finished saying to Todd some things I have come to say to him."

"Gimme my gun, Jake," Ira commanded. He sat up in bed and stretched an eager hand toward the range boss, who shook his head.

"You don't want no gun-play today, Iry," he soothed the manager.

"Kill him," Todd pleaded. "He's threatening me. He's come here to kill me, I tell you."

"That isn't true, Jake. I'm peaceable today. Todd, don't you know Jake will not shoot an unarmed man?"

"Then gimme my gun and I'll do it," Todd pleaded with Jake Dort.

Jake's bruised and swollen face was turned from

Purdy to Todd and back again. "Guess we'll wait till Purdy has a bad day," he concluded. "I come to report, Iry. Everything is fixed up an' I'm startin' for the ranch as soon as I can get a snack o' supper over to the hotel."

"Throw Purdy out before you go," Todd snarled. "I'm a sick man. I can't be annoyed with him."

"Come on, Purdy," Jake commanded. "I'm talkin' to you."

"And I hear you, Jake. You're the law, if that tin star on your vest means anything, and I'm a law-abiding citizen. Good night, Todd. You may get a little sleep tonight, but I doubt it."

Jake Dort followed Purdy out into the corridor and closed the door. The two men stood facing each other. "I've just heard what Iry said to you in the restaurant," Jake said sadly. "I suppose you been in remindin' him of his bad judgment." Purdy nodded. "Gimme three days to argy him into takin' that back, Purdy," Jake pleaded. "Iry ain't such a bad feller once you get to know him well. You got to remember his head ain't workin' right today."

"It certainly wasn't working right yesterday morning."

Jake produced his plug of chewing tobacco and meditatively bit a large chew out of it. "I been tellin' Iry for quite a spell he's got you sized up wrong," he complained.

Purdy stepped up to Jake and laid his hand fraternally on the broad shoulder of his enemy. "Jake, you have occasional lucid intervals. Sometimes you really talk sense. Please tell me what's in back of all this.

Why has Ira Todd declared war on me, Jake? That man itches to see me in a shroud, and I've never done him a day or a moment's harm. What's back of all this enmity, and who is back of Todd?"

"Purdy, I dunno," Jake answered with simple directness. "Iry tells me one thing an' I hear another an' you tell me somethin' else. Me, I ain't in on anything. I'm just Iry's friend an' the range boss of the Box K Ranch. That lets me out."

"Todd came to me with a fair proposition to buy me out a year ago," Purdy complained. "I declined to sell because I didn't want to and I didn't have to. Three months later he came back with an offer of twelve dollars an acre for my seven thousand acres of wild hay land in the valley of the upper Rio Hondo and ten dollars an acre for my hundred thousand acres in El Valle de los Ojos Negros. I paid four dollars an acre for El Valle de los Ojos Negros in 1919, but still I refused to sell. A month later Todd offered me twelve dollars an acre for that desert land and a bonus of ten thousand dollars to abandon my grazing permit if I accepted his offer. I declined because I don't want to leave La Cuesta Encantada until my sister gets well. The altitude and the climate are just what she needs. I am happy here and if I sell I only have to take up the search for happiness again. It's not easy to find a ranch that pleases one as much as my ranch here pleases me.

"I told Todd I wouldn't sell at any price. Then the panic came with the period of post-war deflation and my financial condition changed very rapidly. It seemed wise to sell then, so I called on Todd and told

him I had changed my mind and would consider his last offer. He said his people were no longer interested, but shortly after that twenty thousand sheep invaded El Valle de los Ojos Negros. They were there three weeks before we discovered them, and after my boys drove them off I had to maintain a daily patrol to see that they stayed off. They annoyed me all summer and fall.

"Then I began to find my haystacks catching fire and my line fences breaking. There was a fire in El Valle de los Ojos Negros in midsummer and fifty thousand acres of it burned over. That killed some of my winter range. Meanwhile I began to have trouble from the Forest Ranger Service. Scrub bulls wearing my brand were turned loose on the Reserve, in defiance of the Forest Reserve regulations. Complaints were filed against me. When I shot those scrub bulls somebody shot my pure-bred Hereford bulls. When I irrigated my wild hay land in the upper Rio Hondo I had a suit filed against me by the Box K Ranch farther down. They claimed I was violating their riparian rights on the Hondo. A strange unbranded horse with glanders got into my pasture one night and I lost thirty head of good cow-ponies before the disease was checked. I had a couple of hundred head of hogs feeding in the bottoms along the Hondo and somebody shot nearly all of them. My best saddle-horse was shot, my dogs poisoned.

"Somebody has been trying to make hell look like a summer's holiday for me, to drive me to the point of selling out in sheer desperation. Two weeks ago a stranger offered me eight dollars an acre for my hay

land and five dollars an acre for El Valle de los Ojos Negros. I refused, and immediately I had trouble. A note to the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation fell due and was called, although I had been promised an extension. I blocked that by turning my cattle adrift in the Reserve. A two-hundred-thousand-dollar mortgage—it was a private loan—on El Valle de los Ojos Negros turned up as the property of a bank in Santa Fe. Sixty days before the mortgage fell due I asked if I could pay the interest and fifty thousand dollars on account of the principal and renew the mortgage for three years. The bank refused. So I have to negotiate a new loan and it's mighty hard to get a large loan on semi-desert land in New Mexico at a time when banks are suspicious of loans with Liberty bonds as collateral.

"However, I arranged a private loan, and two weeks ago I wrote the bank that I would meet the mortgage the day it fell due. That was a grave disappointment to somebody, for yesterday at San Onofre a killer tried for me from ambush—and I got the killer! He's down the hall yonder in room seventeen. Jake, somebody wants my ranch and that somebody isn't a cattleman."

"Seems to me," Jake replied, after having listened attentively and respectfully to Purdy's long recital, "the wise thing for you to do is to take the hint. Come back at 'em with a counter offer, do some tradin', sell your ranch an' get out with a whole skin. Looks to me as if they're bound to get you, a-figurin' that with you out o' the way your heirs won't stick it out. Your sister wouldn't have no interest keepin' the ranch with you gone."

"Well, I'm not a quitter, Jake. I know bad medicine

is being brewed for me, but remember this—Ira Todd's medicine is already brewed and three days hence he'll have to take it! That's final."

Jake shook a troubled head and walked out of the hospital. Purdy dragged his reluctant legs down to room seventeen and found Bud Shannon alone and semi-conscious.

Purdy went to the closet where the nurse had hung the killer's clothes and searched the pockets for evidence of Shannon's antecedents or previous connections. He was rewarded with the discovery of an old wallet containing two hundred and fifty-five dollars in bills, the professional card of one Jasper S. Doak, of the legal firm of Doak, Erlin & Doak, with offices in the Citizens National Bank Building, Los Angeles, and that portion of a Pullman sleeping-car ticket which a passenger retains as evidence of his right to occupy a berth. From the stamp on the back of this fragment of ticket Lee Purdy deduced that Bud Shannon had journeyed from Albuquerque to Los Angeles two weeks previous. Had he gone to Los Angeles to call upon Doak, Erlin & Doak, make his bargain and receive his instructions? Was this money part of the killer's retainer?

Doak was the man who had offered to buy the Box K Ranch from Gail Ormsby at the value set upon it by the appraisers of her late uncle's estate! Here, indeed, was an interesting connection. Could this Los Angeles lawyer be the instigator of the systematic persecution to which Lee Purdy had been subjected for a year? And if so, what was his goal? Surely he was not planning to launch a huge cattle company, since no

practical cattleman would consider paying twelve dollars an acre for the semi-arid Valle de los Ojos Negros. As grazing land for beef cattle the feed upon it was too meager and of too brief duration to make the valley worth more than two dollars an acre as winter range in the present state of the market. Although Lee Purdy had snapped it up at four dollars an acre in 1919, his courage and altruism had been predicated on a vision of the profits to be gleaned from pasturing sheep there, since sheep thrive where cows will starve.

Purdy, still pondering the mystery, left Bud Shannon's room and retired to the one assigned him by the doctor. Here he wearily disrobed and climbed into bed, after partaking of a light supper which was served at his bedside. Before falling asleep, however, he very definitely made up his mind on one point. If he would live to dwell in peace on La Cuesta Encantada, then Ira Todd must die, and that quickly.

About eleven o'clock he was awakened by someone shaking his shoulder roughly. "Yes, yes! What is it?" he demanded.

"Get up, Lee," Tommy Scaife's voice answered.

Purdy sat up, anxious-eyed, and beheld the little man and the night nurse on duty in the corridor. "What's happened?" he demanded.

"Nothin', Lee. I just thought I'd come down an' bring you home. Reckoned you might rest easier there than here."

"Hallie all right, Tommy?"

"*Seguro!*" Tommy turned to the nurse. "I know he ain't feelin' any too gay, but the trip home won't

kill him. Good night, ma'am, an' thank you for lettin' me in." He dismissed her with a smile; as the door closed behind her he swept the blankets off Purdy.

"Lee," he explained, "I'm afraid for you. I want you should come home."

"Very well, Tommy. When you commence worrying there's real danger. What do you know?"

"Nothin', Lee, except that as I circled the hill tonight before landin' with Miss Ormsby I marked a small camp-fire up a draw about two miles back of the house. It wouldn't have been visible from the ground."

"Hum-m! Better take Curly McMahon and Joaquin down there before daylight tomorrow morning, Tommy. Roll him out of his blankets, see who he is and ask him what he wants."

"I'll put Curly an' the Chinaman on outpost in the sage back o' the hangar so nobody can sneak down on you from the hills in back after tonight. An' we know nobody will ever be foolish enough to come up the hill road in front."

"Good old file!" Purdy laid his hand affectionately on Tommy's shoulder. "Go on with the rest of your story."

"Well," Tommy continued, "after leavin' Miss Ormsby at the hospital this afternoon a yearnin' come over me to knock down a couple o' frames o' pool over to the hotel. You know that room back o' the old barroom? Well, four strangers was in there playin' a game o' pitch an' at sight o' me they sort o' lost interest in their game. Seems as if I must have looked familiar to one o' them, because every time I'd look up from makin' a run he'd be lookin' me over. Pretty soon the

game broke up an' all four of these strangers took to standin' around the pool table pretendin' a heap of interest in my game, but mostly managin' to get in my way whenever I walked around the table.

"Finally I seen they was lookin' to provoke a riot, so I says to the feller who's most offensive, I says, '*Hombre*, the next time you git in my way you'll know you've met up with a white man.' This was my gentle way of informin' him I could see he wasn't no Mexican as pretended but a quarter-bred nigger. One of his pals then spoke up chesty-like an' says, 'Just what do you-all mean by that?' 'I mean to play pool without interference from white black men or black white men,' I says, an' the nigger promptly stomps on my little toe, which the same sports a corn. I suppose he figured I'd hit him for that—with my fist—but when the odds are against me four to one I don't use my hands for hittin' folks. Instead, I knee him in the belly an' flop him cold; simultaneous I beat his friends to the draw. They're all three reachin' but I'm out first, an' they're covered, on account o' me knowin' in advance what I'm goin' to do an' doin' it, now!"

"Any shooting, Tommy?"

"No, they didn't insist on makin' me prove how fast an' accurate I am. I'll have to prove it later, I s'pose, but I was thinkin' of you today, Lee, an' how bad you're liable to need me, with Link away. An' besides, I had to take Miss Ormsby home. It wouldn't have done nohow to leave her in Arguello all night. She'd die in one o' them hotel rooms—by suffocation or bedbugs, or both."

"Four strangers—and gunmen, eh?" Purdy mused.

"Well, they ain't no tea-room habitués, Lee. I reckon I'd ought to know. The more I thought about them after I got home the more I begun to worry about you alone in this here hospital with Todd."

"I thought of that too, Tommy, so this afternoon I called on Todd and delivered your message. He refused orders, of course; he had to do that for the sake of appearances, but I'm betting he pulled himself together and got out of town ten minutes after I left his room. He knows he can't afford to stay. He'll hold up at the Box K Ranch and do his dirty work from there. Meanwhile, he may not hear about Shannon."

"While you're dressin'," Tommy voluntered cheerfully, "I'll look in at Todd's room an' see how good a prophet you are. What's his room number?"

Purdy told him and Tommy pussy-footed away on his mission. In a few minutes he came pussy-footing back.

"He's gone, Lee."

"I was certain of it. He went out to the ranch with Jake Dort."

Tommy Scaife chuckled malevolently, like a mean little gnome. He delighted in frightening people he disliked. When Purdy had finished dressing, the cautious Tommy led him out the back door of the little hospital. "I don't think anybody knows I'm in town," he explained, "because I dropped in as silent as a dove flyin' down to water an' parked in a field a mile to the west o' town, but still we won't take no chances. Somehow, Lee, Main Street don't appeal to me tonight; street fightin' in the dark makes me nervous."

Once clear of the town Purdy paused and faced Tommy Scaife. "Tommy," he pleaded anxiously, "what *do* you suppose they want?"

"Killin'," Tommy replied. "Come on, Lee. What you need is about forty-eight hours lyin' quietly in bed with nothin' to eat or drink except nutriment."

CHAPTER XIV

TOMMY SCAIFE'S brief visit to the hacienda of his employer, in search of information regarding a common antidote for poison, had brought to Gail's mind once more a plan of action which had occurred to her that afternoon in Arguello, after Scaife had so very definitely outlined his determination to kill her manager on sight. At the time she had been too shocked, too frightened, to make a coherent protest to this extraordinary announcement before the roar of the motor precluded the possibility of pleading with the man to stay his destroying hand. Once in the air, argument was impossible until the ship should land on the Enchanted Hill. During the homeward flight, however, Gail had managed to throw off the mental inhibition initiated by the pilot's words. Her strong, resilient nature rebounded from dumb fright to righteous anger and when her temper had, in a measure, subsided, she could think.

At La Cuesta Encantada Tommy Scaife helped her alight from the plane. In his attitude was discernible the respect and deference due a guest of the ranch, mingled with a cool aloofness born of the knowledge that here was one who, knowingly or unknowingly, was aligned with Lee Purdy's enemies; and Purdy's enemies were his. Gail looked the little man over as coolly and defiantly as he gazed at her.

"Well, are you still of a mind to kill Mr. Todd on sight?" she queried.

He flushed. "I reckon I didn't use good judgment when I told you that, Miss Ormsby." He was ashamed of having permitted himself such an outburst in the presence of a lady. "A few minutes before you came over to the plane I'd had an experience that sort o' brought Mr. Todd to mind an' riled me more'n usual. So I spoke out o' my turn."

"I thought so," the girl replied with chill disdain. "Barking dogs never bite."

He was ruddy enough before she said that, but now his face went a deep scarlet; then the deep flush of embarrassment and chagrin gave way to the whiteness of anger and the terrible bleakness came over his pale blue eyes, like a film. He trembled, tried to speak, choked, and stood looking down helplessly at his feet.

A smile of tolerant contempt, rising out of the knowledge that she had triumphed over him, played over the girl's lovely countenance.

"I had an idea you were dramatizing yourself, Mr. Scaife," she flung at him and started walking toward the house. She had gone less than twenty feet when the man's voice halted her; almost she rose on her toes a trifle as he spoke.

"Miss Ormsby—please!" He said "please" but it was a command nevertheless. She faced him instantly. "I'm sorry I spoke out of my turn, miss; it sort o' gives you a useless worry about Todd, an' there ain't any sense worryin' you about gettin' a new manager until the day comes for you to get one. I reckon I've made you cross your bridges before you come to them."

"There really isn't the slightest necessity for you to be so solicitous about me," she retorted coldly.

"I know there ain't, miss, but that ain't why I stopped you. You said something just now about barkin' dogs an' drama."

"Yes. Well?"

"I didn't make any idle threat, Miss Ormsby. I just gave you a firm promise!"

He tore his helmet from his flaming head and made her a grandiose bow.

"But I don't understand——" Gail began.

He interrupted her. "I reckon that's about all that's wrong with you, Miss Ormsby. You don't understand."

He turned his back on her and went to open the doors of the hangar. For him she had ceased to exist!

Now, following Tommy Scaife's brief appearance at the living-room entrance in search of help for Rory, Gail's mind harked back to this brief but significant conversation. She realized now that of the mental reactions of men like Tommy Scaife she knew something less than nothing. Their stern, inflexible outlook on life, their indomitable pride, their uncompromising adherence to those unwritten laws of the waste places which governed men's actions before the penal code and the code of civil procedure had even been printed —which supersede them still when town-made laws grow cumbersome and ineffective and men lose faith in government—were characteristic not of the men of her world. In the most violent and unjust of men may be found a profound respect for justice and an unsuspected capacity for upholding it—when applied to

other men. Violent though he was, Tommy Scaife's not very profound powers of reasoning had indicated to him that the law had no punishment for the crime Ira Todd had committed—to wit, a charge by insinuation publicly made against a pure woman's virtue, and a cowardly attempt to provoke that woman's brother to his death by striking at her over his shoulder.

Even had Tommy Scaife's loyalty to these victims of calumny and insult not been called into question by Todd's act; even had he not entertained for Hallie Purdy and her brother a profound reverence and affection, his primitive sense of equity, his natural love of a square deal, would have indicated to him that Ira Todd "wanted killin'." To Tommy this man had ceased to be a man. He had degenerated into a predatory animal; wherefore he had ceased to enjoy the benefit of laws relating to men and must abide by the custom and usage applied by men to predatory animals, which are slain by him who sees them first and first recognizes them as a menace to the comfort and property of mankind.

To Gail, knowing nothing of this elemental point of view, Tommy Scaife was a terrible human being—thoughtless, emotionless, cruel, irresponsible; a man who could and would slay without question, without qualm, without investigation as to the necessity for the deed and wholly for the gratification of his brutal nature. He was one of Lee Purdy's two hired gunmen—brave, reckless, ruthless ruffians, bound by habit and self-interest to protect their leader and employer.

That had been Gail's estimate of Tommy Scaife before he appeared before her, anxious-eyed, distressed,

eager to save the life of a dog. She wondered now whether it could be that, in certain unguarded moments, the man was slightly human. Did waves of compassion, of tenderness, sweep over him occasionally?

"I should have offered to help him with Rory. In working over him together we might have established a better understanding," Gail reflected. "I must know that man better; I must eradicate the hostility I have managed to inculcate in that wild heart. It just isn't possible he could have more pity for a stricken dog than for a man doomed to be stricken by his hand!"

She went to her room, put on her coat, slipped out the patio gate and into the path leading up the mesa toward the mess hall and bunk-houses. But no light shone in any of these buildings and she was about to retrace her steps to the hacienda when a light flashed in the window of the hangar some three hundred yards distant. The path to the hangar led through the scrub-oak grove, and simultaneously with the appearance of the light there half a dozen electric lamps, scattered at intervals along this path, came on, illuminating it faintly and encouraging Gail to stroll up to the hangar.

For a few minutes she gazed timidly around her. The night was clear and starlit but a growing light on the mountain tops to the east gave promise of impending moon-rise. Afar on the mesa that sloped gently upward a coyote gave tongue; from the valley below another answered him; save for this and the troubled chirp of a night bird perched in an adjacent tree, an atmosphere of silence and mystery pervaded the night.

Gail felt keenly the necessity for physical action. She must see Tommy Scaife, apologize for hurting his feelings and reestablish some sort of *entente cordiale* with him; she must argue with him about Ira Todd, plead with him to reconsider his apparently unalterable determination to kill the man. She must point out to him the embarrassment which would accrue to her, to him, to the Purdys, to society in general; she must strive to touch the same soft spot in his heart which Rory had touched, by appealing to his chivalry, if he had any. She must impress upon him the dire consequences of his act to her—a guest—and she must do it tonight. Tomorrow might be too late.

Walking toward the hangar, she had almost reached the door when men's voices caused her to retreat instantly. She had recognized readily Tommy Scaife's voice; in the few words spoken by his companion she thought she recognized the soft drawl of Joaquin, the cook. And, since it was no part of her plan to confront Scaife in the presence of a third party, she decided to retreat to the shadow of the oak grove some thirty yards from the door of the hangar and there await developments. Should Joaquin return to the bunk-house she planned to go to the hangar and request Scaife to grant her the favor of an interview.

She leaned against the gnarled bole of a large oak and fell into deep thought, the while the moon rose and shed its mellow effulgence over the Enchanted Hill; afar, in El Valle de los Ojos Negros a silver sheen appeared, the chorus of the coyotes increased, and a mocking bird awoke and with joyous, burbling, golden notes ran the gamut of his repertoire.

Presently Tommy Scaife emerged and opened wide the huge hangar portals. Assisted by his companion he rolled one of the airplanes out, turned it, pointed its nose up the mesa and started the motor.

"There must be something mysterious about this nocturnal flying," Gail thought. Instantly she was alertly interested. "What possible business can that man be embarking on now? And what sudden mysterious, unexplained business kept Lee Purdy in Arguello tonight?"

She watched, unseen in the dark shadows of the grove. Scaife put on his helmet and coat, switched off the lights, padlocked the hangar door, spoke briefly to his companion, climbed into the fuselage and proceeded to hop off the hill. She saw Joaquin watch until the plane hung for a moment, silhouetted against the full moon; then she saw the cook turn to the hangar door and heard the metallic snap as he broke the padlock. With mounting interest she watched him return to the interior of the hangar; she waited for him to switch on the lights, but she waited in vain. Nor did Joaquin emerge from the darkened hangar.

With the switching off of the lights in the hangar, the lights strung along the path through the oaks, which were, apparently, on the same circuit, had gone out also, and Gail stood in deep gloom under the thick branches, with wild expectancy awaiting the next move in the mystery. Of one thing she was certain. Joaquin was now operating on his own account, whatever mischief he was bent upon—and Gail did not for a moment think he was bent upon anything else. Tommy Scaife had had no knowledge of the cook's intention to perpe-

trate it, else he would at leaving not have padlocked the door, thus forcing Joaquin to break the lock the moment Tommy left the hill.

Trembling with apprehension, the girl had an impulse to return as fast as she could run to the hacienda and there lock herself in her room; but her curiosity, piqued to the limit by the knowledge that all unwittingly she had tumbled upon a warfare silent, ferocious and pitiless in this land of wide horizons, counseled her to remain.

Her patience was rewarded. From the corner of the hangar, approaching it from the rear, the figure of a man emerged into the moonlight. His approach indicated caution and secrecy, for he walked softly and slowly and reconnoitered the ground before him before disappearing into the hangar.

Gail's heart thumped wildly. Was this skulking stranger an enemy or a man in league with Joaquin in whatever sculduggery that saddle-colored individual might be contemplating? What was she about to be an unsuspected witness to?

The electric lights came on in the hangar and in the path, and Gail cowered closer behind the tree trunk. Then a man cried in terror: "Don't—don't!" A pistol was fired once; thereafter—silence! Perhaps thirty seconds passed, the lights went out again; and Joaquin slid furtively out the door and stood for several minutes looking toward the distant bunk-house, listening for the approach of whoever might have been attracted by the sound of the shot. After a while he went inside again, turned on the lights for a few seconds, switched them off again, came outside, closed the door, sat down

with his back against it, lighted a cigarette and sat there smoking.

And now Gail Ormsby made a discovery. She could not move. Fear had paralyzed her limbs; gradually she sank to the ground and cowered there, silent and a-tremble, for she had been all but an eye-witness to a killing. Remembering Joaquin José Ramon Oreña y Sanchez's dark, sullen, aboriginal face, with the brooding bloodshot eyes above a high beak of a nose and a roan, piratical mustache, she did not doubt that he would strangle her should she be so foolish as to reveal her presence. She was certain the cook was the sort of murderer who believes firmly in the wisdom of the ancient saw to the effect that dead men—and more particularly dead women—tell no tales.

Time passed and at that altitude the spring nights were very chilly. It seemed to the girl that unless help should reach her soon, she must perish from exposure, although Joaquin, perfectly acclimated, appeared to be quite comfortable. He struck match after match —the creature was an inveterate cigarette smoker— nor moved once from his squatting position before the hangar door.

When nearly two hours had elapsed Gail was overjoyed to hear at a distance the faint purring of an airplane motor. Louder and louder it grew; presently, with a long sibilant swish, it passed over the tree-tops, circled wide around La Cuesta Encantada, settled out on the mesa and, turning, came bumping leisurely over the uneven ground to halt in front of the hangar. Joaquin stood up stiffly, and stood uncovered while Lee Purdy and Tommy Scaife got out of the airplane.

"Lee, you run along to bed," she heard Tommy Scaife shout cheerfully. "Joaquin will help me run the bus into her stall. And here, take my gun in case you run into somebody you don't want to meet."

Tommy passed Purdy his gun and the latter, bidding good night to both men, started down the path leading through the adjacent trees. He came on slowly, with a lag in his legs, like a very weary man; his chin was sunk on his breast.

Although fright had paralyzed Gail two hours before, it quickened her now. She rose, slipped noiselessly across the path and hid behind another tree ten feet back of it, just as Tommy or Joaquin entered the hangar and turned the switch again.

When the light fell squarely upon Lee as he passed, Gail saw a pistol in his hand, and that he was sorely troubled of soul was quite apparent, for she saw him shake his head in a negative, hopeless gesture, saw his hands outflung before him despairingly; she heard him mutter quite distinctly: "O God, if you're on the job, prove it! I don't want to let them do it if there's another way out!"

The man was suffering. In the knowledge that he was suffering keenly—else he would not have talked to himself and God—quick tears of sympathy cascaded down Gail's half-frozen cheeks. She had an impulse to run to him, to strive to comfort him, for what true woman can stand by and see even a strange man suffer without desiring to succor him? A vision of that which was lying on the floor of the hangar deterred her, however; he passed with dragging, weary step down the path, and once he seemed uncertain in his walk. . . .

So he had remained in Arguello to get drunk. She had not harkened to a stricken man but to a drunken man communing with himself. The fount of the girl's tears was closed as quickly as it had opened. She loathed herself now for her momentary weakness. . . . Well, she must wait until the lights should be turned off again; she must freeze and tremble here yet a little longer until Lee Purdy should have time to get to bed; he must not under any circumstances hear her tiptoeing through the patio gate and along the porch to the welcome haven of her room.

Joaquin and Tommy Scaife came out of the hangar, bearing a limp form between them. With heave and grunt and curse they flung it up to the edge of the fuselage and Joaquin held it poised there while Scaife climbed up into the ship and dragged the body down into the cockpit. Then she heard him laugh, and shuddered at the realization that his sense of humor had been profoundly titillated at the perpetration of a murder from ambush. She could not know that a certain joyous malice in Tommy Scaife's strange soul always provoked a laugh when events unpleasant or embarrassing occurred to persons he did not like.

Presently, for the second time that night, Tommy Scaife went roaring off the Enchanted Hill. Joaquin stared after him a minute, then drew some water in a bucket from a tap beside the garage door and returned to the interior of the building. Gail, realizing that he would be busy several minutes cleaning up certain unpleasant evidence of his marksmanship, fled on numbed legs, nor slackened her speed until she reached the patio wall in the rear of the hacienda. Here she

paused to regain her breath, then very cautiously she slipped in the gate and onto the patio veranda.

In the building of that veranda there must have been a devil's devising. At her first step upon it a board creaked loudly; at her next she struck her knee a resounding blow against the corner of a bench. Instantly Lee Purdy's voice challenged softly but quite distinctly from his rooms across the patio:

"Who's there? Quick! Speak, or I'll shoot."

In a pitifully small, frightened voice Gail Ormsby answered the challenge. "Nobody—it's just me." Then she subsided on the accursed bench and commenced to weep with mingled pain and embarrassment.

In a moment Purdy was at her side, his approach unheard because sartorially speaking he was in his "stocking feet." "*Sssh!*" he commanded. "Don't raise a row. You'll awaken Hallie."

"I—I've hurt—my knee," Gail protested, too audibly to please him.

"Quiet, I tell you!" He whispered the words. "Which knee is it?"

"This one," she wailed in a tiny, heartbreaking voice, and rubbed the injured member.

He patted her shoulder sympathetically. "Poor child!" he soothed. "I don't blame you for crying. A hard blow on the knee makes me swear like a pirate. There, there, my dear girl, it'll be better in a few moments. Come now, please buck up."

She struck his caressing hand a resounding slap. "How dare you touch me, you—you—*killer!*" she cried furiously. "You—with your fake sympathy—your sickly sentimentality—your scheming and plan-

ning to rob your neighbors. You—you with your hired murderers and——"

His left hand went firmly over her mouth; with his right under her arm he lifted her from the bench to the patio gate in one great swing. Her head came back against his breast and she sagged helpless against him while he opened the gate and thrust her forth with his knees. Softly he closed the gate behind him.

"It will not do you any good to scream or raise a scene on La Cuesta Encantada," he warned her angrily. "I'm going to take my hand from your mouth now, but if you utter a sound I'll gag you again. Walk on. If you can't I'll carry you."

She walked ahead, silent save for a low gurgling that was the sound of sobs suppressed in her throat. A hundred yards from the house he thrust her gently to a seat on the low-spreading limb of a scrub-oak.

"Now, weep and sob and abuse me all you wish," he commanded. "Sorry I had to manhandle you, but my information and experience has been that no man can soothe an angry, frightened woman with words. You wouldn't obey me; you were permitting your voice and your temper to rise too fast—and I'd told you not to awaken Hallie."

"You contemptible coward!" she sobbed. "You treat me thus—and I your guest!"

"You are my unwilling guest and you are singularly lacking in appreciation of my hospitality. I do not ask you to contribute toward my peace of mind or to respect it, but you must *not* say or do anything that will distress Hallie or worry her or make her suspicious that all isn't exactly as it should be. I shall not per-

mit that. What were you doing, tiptoeing around the patio after everybody had gone to bed hours ago!"

"I—I—was distressed. I couldn't sleep—so I—I walked out in the moonlight. It—it's so beautiful down yonder—in the valley."

"Isn't it cold enough up here for you to wear a hat?" There was an anxious, chiding note in his voice now.

"I didn't intend remaining out—very long. I was —afraid—when I saw the plane in the moonlight. I—wondered——"

"I see. Thought we were up to some dirty work, eh? By the gods, I would never have believed Ira Todd to be the salesman he has proved himself. He has certainly sold you a fine opinion of me."

"Do you care what anybody thinks of you?" she flung at him.

"Yes, I do. I care so much what Hallie thinks of me that it hurts. And I'm weak enough to value your good opinion of me also."

She saw her opportunity and with the adroitness of a clever woman, she struck. "Do you wish me to think better of you than I do?"

He stood before her, shoeless, hatless, coatless, and nodded silently.

"Then do not permit Tommy Scaife to kill Mr. Todd."

"How long a reprieve do you ask, Miss Ormsby?"

"Indefinitely—always."

"You exact a high price for your improved opinion of me. However, it happens that I've been thinking that matter over and I had already come to the conclusion that I must call Tommy off that job."

"Oh, thank you, Major Purdy! And will you call your Link Hallowell off, too?"

"Yes, Link must behave himself also."

"Oh, I'm so grateful to you!"

"Please don't. I've lived long enough in the Southwest to be able to subscribe, in all heartiness and sincerity, to one of its unwritten laws, and that is: Let every man kill his own snakes. My dear young lady, it is with considerable pride that I have to inform you of a perfectly unalterable intention to kill that man Todd myself, unless he accepts my program."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes! He has had his ultimatum. He will sign and swear to before a notary public a document which I shall prepare for his signature. Then I shall publish that document in the Arguello Citizen, paying the customary advertising-space rates for the publication. The document in question will constitute a complete and dignified withdrawal of each and every statement Ira Todd has made to you regarding me and to a certain statement made publicly to me regarding my sister. Having signed the document, Ira Todd immediately will leave this county or argue with me, in the smoke, his right to remain here."

"But—he has cattle to dispose of," Gail cried broken-heartedly, as she realized the inflexibility of the man's purpose.

"I shall buy his cattle at a price to be set upon them by a trio of disinterested cattlemen."

"But—you admitted to me the truth of his charges against you."

"Certainly. To you. But I shall never admit the

truth of them to another human being. They were never proved, so officially Ira Todd is a liar. I've got to live in this country, and in this country when full-grown men decry another man's honor they have to prove it or accept the doctrine of personal responsibility. Todd knows the code but he thinks he'll have me killed before I can invoke it. If I do not defend my sister's honor and my own, men will think I have none."

"And I shall agree with them, Major Purdy. I do not think you are a man of honor."

He grew pale. Even in the moonlight she could see that.

"I have treated you honorably, Miss Ormsby."

"Indeed? Manhandled with honor?" she replied with contempt and loathing in every syllable.

"You were creating a scene in my patio at midnight, weren't you?"

"I admit I forgot myself, but that was no excuse—"

"I am the sole judge of excuses on La Cuesta Encantada," he interrupted her sternly. "I'm in command here and what I say is law. There are some things I cannot afford to let happen."

"You are not a gentleman."

"At least I'm not a weakling."

"I loathe you!"

"That is a mere question of personal taste, Miss Ormsby. Do you think you can go quietly to your room now, without any more theatricals?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then you had better go. Before you do, however, I have one more question to ask. You are leaving tomorrow morning, are you not?"

"I am. If I could I would leave now."

"You cannot, so we will not discuss that point. I will have one of the men take your trunk to Presbery's in my old car immediately after breakfast. Another man will drive you down there in Hallie's closed car."

"Thank you, it will not be necessary to go to that bother. Mr. Todd is sending a light motor truck for me. I wish to put you to as little inconvenience as possible, and I regret more than I can say the humiliation of having so unwittingly placed myself under obligation to you."

"Is that because I manhandled you?"

"No. I can understand that. I think you regretted very much the necessity for having to do it and I admit that from your point of view it was very necessary."

"May I hope then," he pleaded wistfully, "to be forgiven for that necessary bit of violence?"

"You may. I do, indeed, forgive you."

He smiled and waved her toward the patio gate with an imperious gesture of command. "Thank you, Miss Ormsby. I shall continue to hope that, eventually, you may form a more laudable opinion of me than you entertain tonight."

But Gail shook her head. "No, you have killed; you intend to kill again; you maintain and support professional killers and I happen to have rather excellent proof that one of them killed a man from ambush recently and later helped the other killer dispose of the body."

"If that be true," he assured her, gravely humorous, "these killers of mine have commenced to operate independently of headquarters. They are not supposed

to kill anybody except on direct orders from me, and I disapprove most heartily of any other course. It's bad for discipline."

She looked at him with loathing.

He continued. "I'm glad you spoke of this incident, Miss Ormsby. Who, by the way, committed the murder?"

"Joaquin."

"But he's only a cook. I'll not have Joaquin scabbing on other men's jobs. Who got rid of the body for him?"

"Your man Scaife."

"The secretive little red rascal! Just imagine that man keeping news like that from me! Now, I simply will not have Tommy and Joaquin maintaining a private cemetery on La Cuesta Encantada." Again he waved her toward the patio gate. "I'll have those two scoundrels on the carpet at an early date, Miss Ormsby," he promised, "and make them give an account of themselves."

He followed her to the door of her room, saw that she entered it and heard her lock the door behind her. To his courteous good night she did not deign a reply, and by the time he had retraced his steps to his own room he had quite forgotten her amazing disclosure of the illicit activities of Joaquin and Tommy Scaife. In the face of his personal tragedy the impersonal faded to oblivion.

He was not going to see Gail Ormsby again!

CHAPTER XV

AT DAYLIGHT Tommy Scaife hopped off the Enchanted Hill and headed for Bear Tooth's rancheria on the Middle Fork of the Rio Hondo. The old Navajo and his four stalwart sons were shearing sheep in a corral when Scaife taxied up and climbed out. The Indians all spoke Spanish fairly well, and Scaife addressed them in that language.

From them he learned that the ranger had the morning previous borrowed a pony to ride up the Middle Fork. His dog was with him. About noon the dog had returned with blood on his breast; he was excited and tried, as dogs will, to tell them something had happened. Bear Tooth's eldest son had followed the dog back up the Middle Fork and found Steve's body. Returning, he had ridden down to San Simeon and notified the ranger headquarters there.

"Has the coroner arrived?" Tommy queried.

Bear Tooth replied that nobody had arrived and that Steve's body had not been removed. Carter, a forest guard, whose cabin was some two miles farther up the Middle Fork, was camped near the body, guarding it from "varmints."

From Bear Tooth Tommy, too, borrowed a pony and immediately set forth for the scene of the crime. He reached it an hour later and was met by the forest guard, Carter, whom he knew well.

"Dirty business, this," Carter greeted him. "I haven't the slightest idea who could have done it. Steve had no known enemies."

"I've come up on behalf of old Steve to make a private investigation, Carter. Has anything been touched or moved?"

"No. There's Steve's rifle, leaning against that tree yonder. It was there when I got here."

Tommy looked about him. In the center of a clear space, extending from where the hill rose abruptly down to the edge of the Middle Fork, he saw the ashes of an abandoned camp-fire. The cleared space was perhaps thirty feet in circumference—a mere opening between trees. From where he stood Tommy could see that the site of the camp-fire was still moist in one spot; a few feet from it a large canteen lay. He approached the ashes of the old camp-fire and on the edge closest to the creek he noted the mark of a large hob-nailed boot.

"Where's Steve?" he demanded of Carter.

The forest guard pointed to the creek. "He's lying on his back down there in the creek, just at the edge of the water."

"Are his feet pointed toward this bank?"

Carter nodded and Tommy walked over to the edge of the bank. A small bush with a tuft of bunch-grass growing under it was pressed flat and a drop of blood showed on the grass. Tommy peered over the bank and down into Steve MacDougald's dead face. He observed that the dead ranger was wearing hob-nailed boots.

He descended into the creek to examine the body. High up on the ranger's left breast—almost too high

to have pierced the heart—he found a bullet hole; and when he turned the body over the point of exit showed on the right side, a little in back and even with the last rib. Tommy turned the body over again, in the same position in which it had fallen, climbed up out of the creek, went to the spot where the imprint of the hob-nailed boot was and stood in the same position. He found himself facing the hillside—and his view was unobscured for about seventy-five yards. There were neither trees, drooping branches nor underbrush to prevent a man, hiding up that hillside, from seeing him.

Straight up the hillside Tommy Scaife went to a thick clump of buck-brush. In the moist earth behind this clump he found unmistakable evidence that a man had sat there. So Tommy Scaife sat down in the same spot and found himself gazing between the fork of two of the stoutest limbs on the buck-brush. He examined the fork and noted that the crotch was slightly chafed. Next he searched very patiently in the little twigs and briers round about and presently he was rewarded.

"Well?" Carter queried.

"Still a mystery," Tommy Scaife admitted. "Reckon I'll mosey along down the Middle Fork and see if I can pick up any sign. Whoever killed Steve did it for hire, so it stands to reason the killer was imported. When he entered this country I reckon he didn't enter over the Cuyamaca Range. Too much snow at the higher altitudes. It stands to reason he come up here from the country below, so of course he went back that way after doin' his job. He didn't have no horse up here, so it seems likely he'd choose a path that wouldn't leave no trail."

"Yes, he'd walk down the creek for a spell, keepin' to the water," the forest guard agreed.

Tommy Scaife nodded his acquiescence, leaped down into the creek and followed the stream, for a mile. And presently he found the sign he sought. In the mixed mud and sand at the edge of the stream he found the imprint of a man's foot. He studied the imprint, measured its length with a piece of twig and compared the resultant measurement with that of his own boot.

He gazed about him, observing that at this point the creek had at one time curved in a wide sweep in time of freshet. Now, with the Middle Fork greatly reduced in size because of the lateness of the season, this bend was a wide sand-bar, with willows growing on the far edge of it, and there were unmistakable signs that a horse had been tied to one of these willows for several hours. About forty feet below this spot a trail had been worn down the bank by cattle coming to water; it had been down this cow trail into the creek bed that the killer had ridden to hide his horse. Here, his grim task accomplished, he returned, mounted and rode up the cow trail into the open again. Cattle, coming down the trail subsequently, had obliterated the mark of the horse's hoofs, but in the sand between the edge of the willow growth and this trail—sand that had been kept moist because the willows shaded it at night —Tommy Scaife found four hoof-prints.

He went into the willow thicket where the horse had been tethered. Knowing the ways of horses when tethered and left alone for hours, he realized that the horse had, doubtless, pawed, twisted and threshed around more or less.

In the cracks of the chapped bark of the willows he found two hairs—one long and one short.

He returned to the scene of the murder, mounted his borrowed horse and returned to Bear Tooth's rancheria. "Where is Ranger MacDougald's dog?" he demanded as he handed the Indian a dollar.

Bear Tooth led him to his tumbled-down barn, where the masterless collie was tied. He greeted Tommy after the fashion of a friend; the little man led him out to the airplane and tied him securely in the cockpit. He then inspected his ship very carefully and flew six miles to San Simeon, a hamlet consisting of a post-office, a general store, a blacksmith shop and half a dozen houses. San Simeon was the headquarters for the ranger service of the Cuyamaca National Forest. Here the supervisor, Jim Presbery, lived and here he kept stored fire-fighting tools, powder and a motor truck. A ranger assistant handled the telephone exchange and did the clerical work of the office.

Tommy Scaife landed in the pasture back of Presbery's house and strolled over to the office. Presbery was gone with the sheriff—who combined with his office that of coroner—to visit the scene of the murder. They had taken a pack-mule with them to bring in the body, so Tommy was informed by the ranger assistant, Branscomb.

"Too bad about old Steve," Branscomb declared. "After eleven years on the Cuyamaca he had just been appointed supervisor to succeed Jim Presbery."

"That's interestin' news," Tommy vouchsafed. "First I heard about it."

"Steve never even knew of the appointment himself.

We got the letter day before yesterday. Jim was down to Arguello but I didn't telephone the news to Steve at his station. Presbery likes to be the first bearer of glad tidings."

"Naturally, he bein' the chief," Tommy assented. "Where's Jim Presbery transferred to?"

"The Shoshone National Forest in Montana."

"Hum-m-m! When does he leave?"

"His orders are to leave at the earliest possible date, but I dare say Steve's death will change the plans of the Department. Anyhow, Presbery couldn't leave right now. His youngest boy's on the puny list."

Tommy rose, yawning and stretching his arms. "Well, guess I'll be moseyin' along. Got to go over to the blacksmith and buy an assortment of horseshoes. Seems to me about all we do over to La Cuesta Encantada is shoe horses. *Adios.*"

He dropped in at the blacksmith shop, where he carefully selected a dozen horseshoes from the smith's stock on hand and spent five minutes haggling jovially with the smith over the price. He swore the smith was overcharging him because Lee Purdy preferred to have his horses shod at La Cuesta Encantada. The smith indignantly denied any charge of profiteering, and when eventually a good-natured bargain was struck Tommy sat down on an upturned nail keg and prepared to indulge himself in a little rural gossip.

"By the way," he queried presently, trying a shot in the dark, "who was that saddle-colored son of a horse thief I seen standin' around here yesterday, while you was shoein' his horse? A Mexican, about as big as me, but lighter weight. He had a buckskin horse

with black points, with the left front foot pigeon-toed an' the shoe missin'. This Greaser is a nervous, wild-lookin' *hombre.* He had a short rifle in a scabbard on his saddle. Seems to me I seen that fellow somewhere once before but I can't seem to make out where it was."

He scored a bull's-eye. "I don't know who he is, Tommy. I never seen the feller before. He acted kinder crazy to me."

"Well, he was crazy enough to attract my attention."

"I didn't see you in town yesterday, Tommy. I didn't even see you come into the shop. Why didn't you say hello?" the smith demanded.

"Ain't no sense interruptin' a busy man at his work," Tommy explained, and with his natural secretiveness changed the subject at once. "I hear Jim Presbery's goin' to leave."

Ensued ten minutes of small talk and then Tommy took his leave. From the blacksmith shop he drifted over to the general store and gossiped for another ten minutes before flying home to the Enchanted Hill. He landed here long enough to turn over Steve's collie to the cook, with orders to feed the animal; then he took off the hill again, flying low over the surrounding country, toward the draw where he had seen the flicker of a camp-fire the evening before.

In a small hidden cañon he saw a buckskin horse with black mane and tail grazing; from some oak trees at a little distance a thin, almost indiscernible column of smoke was drifting straight upward in the still air.

"Hum-m-m!" Tommy surmised. "He's had a late

breakfast or he's just firin' up to shake some lunch together."

He flew straight on over the low foothills, rose steadily higher and higher and disappeared into the north, swung in a thirty-mile circle and came back to La Cuesta Encantada. Straight to the barn Tommy went, saddled a horse, tied a rawhide riata to the pommel, slipped a sporting carbine in a scabbard along the right side of his mount under the sweat leather, and jogged away across the mesa toward the east. Presently he swung north, circled gradually west and then south and at one o'clock rode cautiously down into the glade where the buckskin horse still grazed.

When within a quarter of a mile of him, Tommy dismounted, tied his horse in a clump of willows and, taking advantage of every bit of cover, proceeded with the stealth of a panther stalking a deer until he found himself, while still hidden, commanding an unobstructed view of the little clump of scrub-oaks from which he had seen the smoke rising two hours before. Here he waited patiently until sunset—and then a small, slight Mexican came out of the scrub-oak clump and walked across the field, trailing a horsehair hitching rope behind him. He was about to catch up his hobbled horse. Tommy waited until the man was half-way across the little glade; then he slipped unseen into the clump of scrub-oaks. When his quarry returned, leading the horse, Tommy spoke:

"Hands up!"

Simultaneously he shot the man's high-crowned felt hat neatly off the latter's head in order to make his command more impressive. Instantly the stranger's

arms went skyward; he stood, facing Tommy, trembling violently, his dark face suddenly gone a sickly white.

"Unbuckle your belt and let your gun drop," Tommy commanded next.

The man, silent and trembling more violently than before, obeyed.

"Now, then, my friend," his captor addressed him, "what do you want on this ranch?"

"*Nada*," came the reply in Spanish.

"*Bueno yo habla Español*," Tommy answered, and in Spanish continued. "Who gave you permission to camp here? We don't like strangers camping so close to the house without permission. Now, you saddle that cayuse of yours, roll your pack and come with me to La Cuesta Encantada. Señor Purdy wants to talk to you."

He possessed himself of the man's rifle and pistol and stood by, watching every move of his captive with alert, malignant eyes. "And you keep your hands out of your pockets, too," he warned the fellow.

The horse saddled and the camp equipment rolled and lashed in back of the cantle, at a sign from Tommy the Mexican mounted and rode out into the glade, his captor trotting along behind him, carrying both rifles and the pistol and belt. He had no fear that the man would bolt or that, bolting, he could escape; Tommy was far too good a wing-shot with a rifle to fear any such contingency. Arrived at the willows where Scaife's horse was tied, the procession halted. Without once taking his malevolent glance from the Mexican, Tommy uncoiled his riata, pinioning the man's

arms to his side. With a short length of buckskin thong he tied the killer's hands securely behind him; then, without removing the riata, he passed the free end along the buckskin's neck, through the *jacimo*, and fastened it to his own pommel. Thus man and horse were tethered to Tommy's mount; there could be no escape. The little man next disposed the firearms on his own horse and, leading the buckskin, jogged serenely back to the Enchanted Hill.

CHAPTER XVI

GAIL ORMSBY did not sleep after her embarrassing and unexpected encounter with her host that night. Fright, sorrow, anger, humiliation and horror struggled for mastery in her soul; at eight o'clock next morning she rose, sleepless and pink-lidded of eye—for she had not ceased to weep the night through—packed her trunk and bags and then decided that to partake of a cup of coffee and a piece of toast could not materially add to the humiliation she already felt at having been made the victim of the Purdy hospitality. Conchita waited upon her in the dining-room and Gail noticed that the table was set for one.

"The Señorita Pur-dee all time have breakfast in the bed," Conchita explained, "and thees mornin' the Señor Pur-dee don't feel good, so the Señor too have breakfast in the bed."

Gail favored her informant with a wan smile. "The pig!" she cried under her breath. "He's ill from the vile liquor he drank in Arguello last night."

After breakfast she decided that a tip to Conchita would be in order; for a moment she thought of leaving a twenty-dollar bill in a note to Purdy as payment for her board and lodging for two days, but finally decided that this would be a bit gauche—a deliberately impolite act. At least, she thought, his hospitality had been genuine enough and, regardless of his morals,

there could be no doubt of one thing—Hallie was a lady. For the little invalid's sake she must depart from this house with a smile, a hearty expression of appreciation of a hospitality that had become unbearable, a hand-shake for this feudal cattle baron, Purdy. She hoped the auto truck Ira Todd had promised to send for her would not long delay its arrival.

Once back in her room she sought her purse. She could not find it. Frightened, she searched everywhere, even going so far as to unpack her trunk and bags. But the purse was certainly not in that room and when Gail could still the mounting panic that had seized her she remembered she had carried it in her hand when, the night previous, she had strolled up the path toward the hangar. Undoubtedly she had dropped it where she had crouched at the foot of the oak tree.

In a moment she was out the patio gate and hurrying along the path. But the purse was not to be found, although she searched for it carefully.

"Perhaps one of the men found it," was the thought that gave her comfort now, for that lost purse had contained every dollar she had in the world—that being the reason, in fact, why she had carried it with her rather than leave it in her room. She returned to the hacienda, repacked her baggage and indulged herself in a few more tears as the enormity of her predicament dawned upon her. She would have to ask Purdy to inquire among the men at the bunk-house for the lost purse, when her host chose to emerge from his chamber. Meanwhile she must compose her soul in patience, and if the motor truck should call for her and her baggage the driver must wait on Lee Purdy, too.

At noon Hallie appeared in the living-room as was her custom; ascertaining from Conchita that her brother was still abed, she went to the door of his room and talked a few minutes with him. At twelve-thirty she came to her guest's room and tried not to notice anything unusual in Gail's telltale face.

"Lee doesn't feel very well this morning," she explained, "so he decided to remain in bed. Tommy brought him home very late last night. Luncheon is served and my brother has asked me to present his excuses for his non-appearance. Won't you have luncheon with me?"

Gail shook her head, unable to trust herself to speak. "I'll have Conchita bring you some luncheon here," the tactful Hallie then suggested, and withdrew. Five minutes later she returned.

The wistfulness was gone from Hallie's face now; it beamed with genuine childish delight as she danced up to Gail and clapped the latter on both cheeks. "You do not *have* to leave us, Gail," she declared. "Mr. Presbery has just telephoned to say he cannot come for you and he does not know when they may receive you. One of the Presbery children has scarlet fever and the house is in quarantine."

Gail started up, her face alternately white and red. "I—I must talk with Mr. Presbery," she protested. "I——"

"Why, my dear," Hallie interrupted reproachfully, "don't you want to be our guest? There isn't another place in all this country where you could possibly put up except the Presberys' and Tommy Scaife says it isn't very nice there."

"But I—Hallie, I came to this country on business connected with the Box K Ranch. I have to live somewhere close to it—my manager and Major Purdy are bitter enemies, and he cannot come here to consult with me. Really, if I appear rude, it's because I'm in such a quandary."

"Oh! So that's all. Is that why you're so unhappy, dear?"

"No, I—I've lost or misplaced my purse and it contained all of the money I have in the world."

"When did you lose it?"

"Last night. I couldn't sleep and I went for a walk around the place. I—m-must have dropped it."

"We'll find it. We'll have everybody out looking for it. None of the men would keep it if they found it."

"But if they cannot find it—I've looked all over for it—I don't know what I shall do." And now the tears came in abundance. Hallie perched herself on the arm of Gail's chair and placed her arm around her guest. "Hush!" she protested. "Lee will lend you money. There, there, please do not worry about the old purse."

"It had bills and traveler's checks for eight hundred dollars in it."

"Lee will make good anything lost by our guest. He'll advance you eight hundred dollars and repay himself when the purse is found, as it's bound to be."

"Your brother, Hallie, must do nothing of the sort."

"Well, then, permit me to lend you such funds as you may require until your purse is found or you can secure money after your return to Los Angeles."

"But I—I didn't intend to return to Los Angeles. I have no reason to go back—no relatives, few friends —no immediate means of making a living. All I have is the Box K Ranch. I came here to investigate the condition of that property—to decide whether to sell it or continue to operate it. I cannot operate it without a manager—and money, and I have a manager who can—borrow money—and has—to continue operating—and that Tommy Scaife told me yesterday he was going to kill—Mr. Todd on sight——"

Hallie's little white hand against Gail's mouth stopped further complaint. "The wretch! He must have been jesting, Gail." Hallie spoke bravely enough, lightly enough, yet she knew in her heart that Tommy Scaife knew his place and that never by any possibility could he so far forget himself as to make such a statement in jest to a lady; particularly to a lady immune under the sacred laws of hospitality.

"He meant it, Hallie. He's as deadly as a tiger."

"Wait till I see him, dear. He'll be as deadly as a kitten then. I'll tell Tommy Scaife where he heads in," she added in the Western idiom.

Hope stirred in Gail's unhappy heart. "And can you control Link Hallowell too, Hallie? It seems he and Tommy Scaife shook dice for the privilege of killing Mr. Todd."

"I do not understand such unkind actions on Tommy's part, Gail. Usually he's a dear! And Link is always a dear. I'll guarantee Link's behavior, too."

Gail recalled a vision of Tommy Scaife assisting Joaquin Sanchez to toss the body of a murdered man into the cockpit of his airplane; she seemed to hear

again Scaife's merry laugh, following a hearty curse, as the body dropped into the cockpit; consequently she wondered now just what Hallie Purdy's concept of a masculine dear might be.

"Well, Hallie," she replied, "I feel assured now. But Mr. Todd still is in danger."

"From whom?"

"Major Purdy."

Hallie's laugh was genuine now. "Silly dear," she demanded! "Who possibly could have told you my brother intended killing Ira Todd?"

"Your brother did—last night. I met him just after he came home from Arguello."

"Then no jest was intended, Gail. Excuse me while I investigate."

In a few minutes she returned, depressed, trembling, and very close to tears.

"Lee says that recently something occurred between him and Mr. Todd which made my brother, Tommy and Link very, very angry. He says nobody really desires to kill Mr. Todd, and he thinks Mr. Todd will be reasonable and not commit suicide. Lee says he will join us at luncheon in a few minutes and after luncheon we will discuss the issue calmly."

"I will do anything to avert murder, yet I am peculiarly helpless among these warring men, Hallie."

Hallie's mouth set in a firm line. "I'm glad you brought this subject up, Gail. I've known intuitively for a long time that Lee was in trouble, but he wouldn't confide in me because he feared to distress me. Now the truth will out and I'm grateful to you for precipitating Lee's confession."

"I'm so sorry to make you unhappy with my troubles, Hallie, but you can understand now how impossible my situation has become. How may I, with dignity and without embarrassment to all of us, continue to accept your hospitality? I must find some other place to live."

"I think," Hallie replied firmly, "that the very best thing you can do to promote peace is to remain here with us and insist that your manager interview you here. Nobody will hurt him or treat him with incivility; he can come and go as he pleases, and you can talk over your business affairs in Lee's office. You must help me ascertain what lies at the back of all this enmity and enact the rôle of peacemaker."

"I fear that plan is impossible."

"But you will give it a trial, will you not?"

"I will try, but Mr. Todd may not consent to the plan."

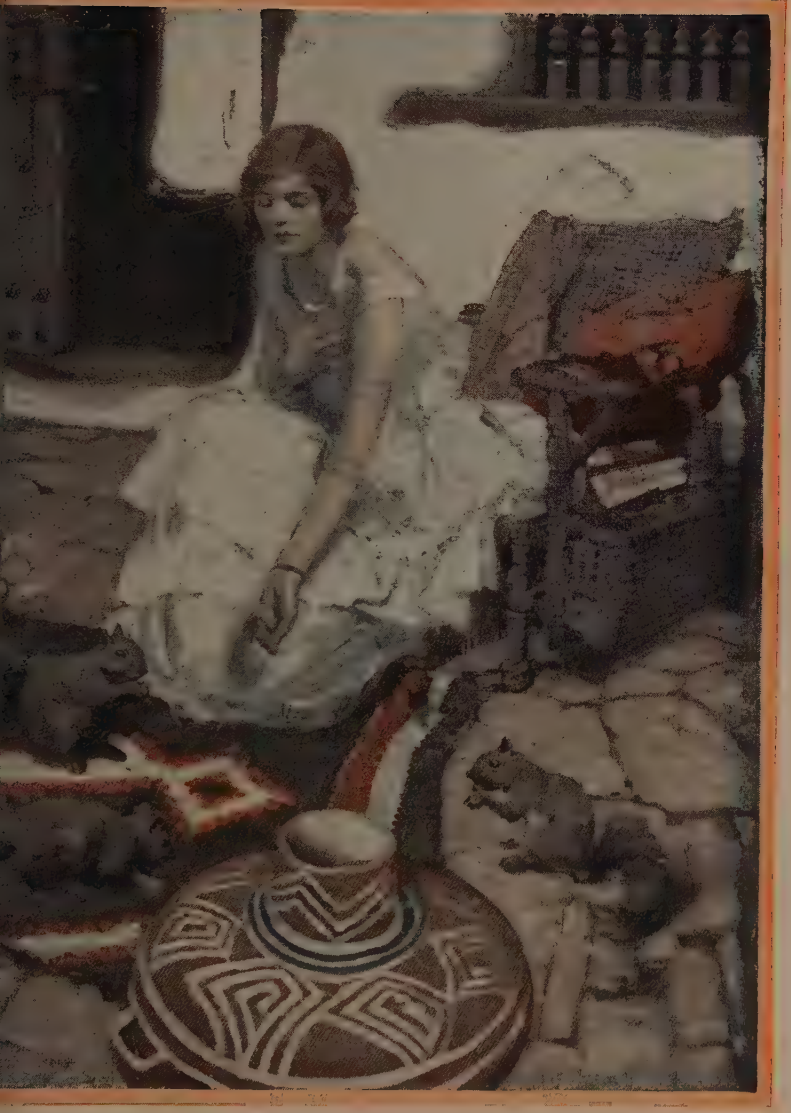
"If he does not consent to it, then I shall not consent to keep my brother and his men under control, Gail. Lee says he *knows* his life is in danger and for that reason he has planned to shoot Ira Todd at an early date if the menace isn't removed."

"Hallie, I don't know what to do! I'm helpless."

"Then remain here, follow Lee's advice and you'll not be helpless very long."

"But—pardon me if I speak bluntly, Hallie—Mr. Todd advises me not to be guided by Major Purdy's advice—and Mr. Todd's reasons were very convincing. Even your brother admitted that. And I'm certain, when one has a manager, one should permit that manager to manage."

"Major Purdy, I am in truly desperate straits," said



"I ask for mercy, not for Mr. Todd, but for myself."

"Oh, I suppose he told you Lee had an ulterior motive, and of course that is the oldest, cheapest and most shop-worn argument in the world, also the best! Gail, my brother never did a dishonorable act in all his life."

Gail had no answer to this loyal statement, although, had her informant been anyone except Hallie, she might have reminded her that Lee Purdy had confessed to dishonorable acts and that he had, in fact, once been dismissed without honor from the United States army, although subsequently reinstated with other punishment substituted.

"Of course," Hallie went on, with a calmness and composure reminiscent of her brother, "I can understand your position also. Mr. Todd was your uncle's trusted right-hand man for years, and as Lee once admitted to me, Mr. Todd stands very high in the estimation of many good citizens of this county. So does my brother. Lee says he is regarded as highly as Mr. Todd—that one-half their world believes they each wear wings and the other half is quite certain they each wear horns and a spiked tail." She passed her arm around Gail's shoulders now. "There, there, let us not think too much about it for the present. Everything will be adjusted without bloodshed and Lee and I are your friends."

Lee Purdy appeared within a few minutes. His rest had refreshed him greatly; with the exception of an unwonted paleness there was nothing to indicate that he had the day previous voluntarily given a pint of his blood to save the life of the man who had tried to kill him. He smiled at Gail his grave, guardedly whim-

sical smile and expressed his regret at the loss of her purse.

"Of course one of those inquisitive little West Highland terriers of Hallie's went out for a constitutional this morning," he declared, "and found your purse. Naturally he carried it away for investigation and possible destruction. I imagine, however, that when he discovered it was unfit to eat he abandoned it. I'll have all hands out after luncheon and we'll comb every foot of the hill until we find it."

Despite the efforts of all three to maintain an appearance of gaiety, luncheon was a gloomy function. Purdy was secretly enraged at Gail because of the latter's revelations to his sister; Hallie, always the perfect hostess, was nevertheless secretly displeased with her guest because of the latter's lack of faith in the integrity and honor of the head of the House of Purdy; while Gail hated herself and Lee Purdy and was uneasy in the presence of Hallie—since it is a law of life that no woman can conceal from another a hint of her secret feelings concerning that woman. The embarrassment incident to the loss of her purse and the coming down of the wretched Presbery child with scarlet fever at this most inopportune time, made her numb with misery. She was between the devil, Purdy, and the deep sea, so to speak. Twelve hours before she had rejected the Purdy hospitality, had wept because she had been tricked by fate into accepting it; now that same perverse fate was forcing her to an indefinite acceptance of it.

Purdy, of course, had no difficulty in reading her thoughts, for when the meal was over and he followed

Gail and Hallie out to chairs on the veranda overlooking the patio, he stepped up alongside Gail for a moment and murmured confidentially: "I'm sorry it's fallen out this way, but of course I didn't steal your purse and I didn't inoculate the Presbery child with scarlet fever. Suppose we forget last night's occurrences."

"I cannot—ever," she breathed. "I'm terribly, terribly disappointed."

"In me?"

"Yes, in you. I didn't think you could possibly be the man you are."

"Well," he answered without anger, "in the sweet by and by we shall see that which we shall see. I am what I am, yet I'm an alabaster saint compared with some people I know."

He watched the girls seat themselves and stood facing them. "I shrink from a discussion of this matter, Hallie, as you know," he began. "Let us not, therefore, indulge in saddening and disgusting detail. Miss Ormsby, your Mr. Todd will not be able to discuss your affairs with you until after several days have passed. Meanwhile I will send him a letter guaranteeing him safe conduct if and when he may choose to come here to discuss your affairs with you. Out of courtesy to our guest and because I cannot refuse my sister anything, Miss Ormsby, I shall declare a truce for two weeks, although that means I must not leave La Cuesta Encantada.

"Two weeks should be ample time for Todd to think matters over; it should afford you ample opportunity to convince him that he should do that which I have

demanded he shall do. Also, during that two weeks you will have time to go over your ranch accounts with him, devise ways and means to meet your current obligations and outline a policy for future operation of your property; then if you conclude that your interests will best be served by selling your ranch, why, you can sell, and the sale may automatically relieve me of the liability of future clashes with Ira Todd. The new owner may not retain him as manager. After selling your ranch you will leave this barbarous country, and forget Todd and Lee Purdy and all the other rough-necks you met here; if Todd and I should get into a fatal argument afterward, the result should not necessarily cost you a minute's sleep. What I contemplate now is saving you from financial loss, embarrassment or ruin by not removing your manager before you have finished with him. Is that plan satisfactory?"

Gail nodded. "It seems eminently fair—from your point of view. I will be frank, Major. I am not at all concerned as to what may happen to Mr. Todd after I have made a decision as to my future; I feel wholly dependent upon him now and I am in truly desperate straits; I ask for mercy, not for Ira Todd, but for myself."

"You shall have it. I wasn't aware——" Purdy began, but the girl silenced him with a wave of her hand.

"Mr. Todd appears sufficiently intelligent to appreciate the enormity of any offense he may have committed, and he should appreciate it if he is at all conversant with the custom of the country. He is

entirely responsible for his personal acts, as I view the situation. If a public apology is due from him to you, if he realizes that it is due and that it is the fair and manly thing for him to accept your terms; if he realizes that refusal to accept them will mean that inevitably he will be called upon to defend his life, I'm sure I should not grieve if he elects to follow the latter course."

"Spoken like a man, Miss Ormsby. I'll play fair with you and I'll play fair with Todd. I give him to you for two weeks. If at the end of two weeks you cannot make him be reasonable, you are to give him back to me to do with as I see fit. Understood?"

"Perfectly."

"I give you my word of honor also that, should it become necessary for me to kill him, the job will not be done from ambush. I'll get him in the open or not at all."

"Well, since there must be a code to a killing, that seems very fair of you. And you answer for similar conduct on the part of your—ah—hired men?"

"I do—upon my honor. Now, can we not be friends for two weeks?"

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE silence that ensued the patio gate opened and Curly McMahon, one of the riders of La Cuesta Encantada, stepped inside. "Boss," he called from the gate, "Pete Howe from the Box K is here and wants he should see you for a minute, if you ain't too busy."

"Certainly, Curly. Tell him to come right in." He turned to Gail. "Any communication I may have with your man, Pete Howe, should, very properly, be had in your presence."

She nodded. "It is very hard to be unfriendly with you, Major Purdy. I shall be very happy to be convinced that—that—well——"

Hallie interrupted sweetly and patted Gail's hand: "Why say it if it's so hard to say? We'll take it for granted, will we not, Lee?"

"We'll take whatever you desire, little sister, even if it should be a hot stove. . . . Come in, Pete."

Pete Howe, arrayed in leathern chaps, entered, advanced with a rhythmic, metallic jingle from his spurs, doffed his hat to the ladies and remained uncovered, gazing helplessly at Purdy.

"Well, Pete," the latter saluted him easily. "What's the latest gossip from the Box K?"

"Well, Major Purdy, sir," Pete Howe replied, with a painful grin, " the latest news is that Mr. Todd and

Jake Dort come back to the Box K late last night. Jake's a deputy sheriff now an' he's filed an attachment on all the *caballada* an' is drawin' four dollars a day as the official watch-dog for the creditors, which I ain't one of 'em an' I want that Miss Ormsby should know it."

"That is understood, Pete. What next?"

"Well, Mr. Todd announced that he was still manager an' that Jake Dort was still range boss. 'That bein' the case,' I says, 'I reckon I'm just a plain cow-hand again.' 'Which you're not even that on the Box K any more,' says Jake. 'You're fired.' So right after breakfast this mornin' I saddle the only pony I own, pack my suggins on in back an' come here, Major Purdy, sir, lookin' for a job o' work."

"You did exactly right, Pete. You're out of a job because I put my oar in where it wasn't wanted and where I couldn't maintain it. Tell Curly to show you a room in the bunk-house, turn your pony into the pasture and make yourself at home on the wages of a top cow-hand. Link Hallowell will be back in a few days. See him for anything you may happen to need. Glad to have you on the ranch, Pete."

"Thank you, sir."

But still Pete Howe lingered and Purdy thought he detected in the cowboy's eyes a plain statement to the effect that a job had not been the only thing Pete Howe had called for.

"Anything else you wanted to speak to me about, Pete?" he queried.

"Yes, sir, but it's a private matter."

"Does it concern you or the Box K Ranch?"

"It concerns the Box K, I reckon. Anyhow, it ain't no business o' mine."

"Then speak right out, Pete. Anything that concerns something that has happened on the Box K must not be discussed with me in private. I must insist that you include Miss Ormsby in your confidences."

"All right, if you say so, sir, but I was referrin' to what you fellers pulled off here an' at the Box K last night."

"What do you mean?"

"What you fellers done to Ira Todd."

"When?"

"About half-past twelve this morning."

"Pete, I haven't the slightest idea what you're driving at."

"Honest?"

"Honest. Don't ask me riddles, Pete. Speak up."

"Why, along after midnight last night we-all at the Box K are woke up by the snarlin' of a si-reen—you know, one o' them wailin' kind o' whistles that sound like somebody was murderin' a devil. It was far off at first, but it come closer an' closer; then we heard an airplane passin' overhead. It kept circlin' over the Box K, with that si-reen a-wailin', an' comin' lower an' lower. Everybody—includin' even Ira Todd, sick as he is—run out in his shirt tail, an' then the airplane come swoopin' down an' whizzed by mebbe thirty feet over the ranch. An' when it was right over the yard where we all stood gapin' up, somethin' dropped out an' mighty near hit us."

Pete Howe fumbled his weather-worn sombrero and seemed embarrassed.

"Well, Pete, of course I have no curiosity as to the nature of the thing that dropped out, so I am not going to ask you to tell me what it was." He turned to Gail. "Miss Ormsby, however, as the owner of the Box K Ranch may have a pardonable curiosity as to the nature of the thing that was dropped on her ranch at midnight from an airplane."

Gail's face had gone ashen. She felt faint. Pete Howe looked at her and his honest face grew rosier than before. "I reckon I've talked too much already," he mumbled, and started to move off. But Purdy stopped him.

"I have no curiosity to know what was dropped," the girl managed to say. "I already know!"

Pete Howe started as if bee-stung and Lee Purdy turned a look of blank amazement upon his guest. The gaze that met his was not to his liking, so he shifted again to Pete Howe. "What kind of an airplane was it, Pete?" he demanded.

"It looked exactly like the one you an' Tommy Scaife fly around in once in a while."

"The siren you mention might be one that Tommy Scaife affixed recently to the exhaust of one of my ships. It can be heard for miles in still air and Tommy wanted a distinct signal on patrol—one that meant forest fire and would put every ranger and lookout on guard. And, as a matter of fact, I heard Tommy Scaife hop off the hill after he brought me home close to midnight last night. I didn't think anything of it because I knew Tommy was interested in spotting the camp-fire of a stranger that appeared uninvited on this ranch yesterday."

"It *was* Tommy Scaife," Gail found the courage to say.

"For the sake of argument I'll admit it was Tommy Scaife, Miss Ormsby. I suppose the little cuss was inspired to get Ira Todd out of bed in the pious hope that Todd might catch cold. What did Tommy drop, Pete? I have a right to know what my man drops from my ship. Speak up."

Pete Howe glanced at Gail for permission and, upon receiving an affirmative nod, promptly answered his new employer's question.

"Major, he dropped a corpse!"

"Thank you, Pete. That will be all!" Lee Purdy's voice had a freezing quality in it now; abruptly Pete Howe took his departure and only the steady clinking sound of his spurs broke the silence in the patio. Then the gate slammed gently and Lee Purdy commenced to whistle softly the opening bars of "Sobre las Olas." Gail found something to interest her in the antics of a humming-bird despoiling an adjacent flower and Hallie was very quiet, staring at her hands folded in her lap. She was the first to speak.

"Well, Brother Purdy," she said calmly, "you got into deep water very close to the shore, didn't you?"

"Sure did, Hallie. And poor old Pete didn't shove me in either. I just naturally dove in with all my clothes on, didn't I?"

"Tommy appears to be a great source of embarrassment today, doesn't he, dear?"

"Sometimes," her brother replied plaintively, "I am quite at a loss to know whether I would prefer to see Tommy arrayed in a morning suit, with lilies of the

valley in his lapel and a million-dollar bride on his arm, with me his best man; upon other occasions Tommy would look beautiful to me in an undertaker's dress suit, with me in the rôle of pall-bearer. Hallie, Tommy hasn't been confiding in me lately."

"Of course I know that. If he had, you would not have walked into the tight little hole you now occupy. Well, old boy, I'll not add to your misery by demanding an explanation you cannot supply. Send for that terrible Tommy, dear, and let us have the truth out of him."

"I sent for the terrible Tommy an hour ago and received word that he hopped off at daylight. Out on patrol, I suppose. When he returns Curly McMahon will see him and tell him to report to me." He favored Gail with a sidelong glance. "So you knew what Tommy had dropped, eh, Miss Ormsby?"

Gail nodded coldly.

"Please be good enough to tell me everything you know about this matter," he pleaded. "I know absolutely nothing about it myself."

With a thrill she sensed that he was speaking the truth—that the news of the killing had leaked out only because his meticulous sense of the fitness of things had dictated that, in view of their altered relation, he could not, with entire propriety, discuss her affairs with one of her late employees unless she was present.

Hallie sat straight up and gazed inquiringly at Gail. She appeared to say, "Well, proceed! I am listening."

"I have to tell you," Gail began. "I've wanted to

tell you, but I was afraid. I was afraid last night when you encountered me in the patio, Major Purdy. I didn't want to dwell under the same roof with you and that horrible secret——"

Hallie reached over and possessed herself of Gail's hand. "Begin at the beginning, dear," she commanded. And Gail began at the beginning and kept bravely on to the end. When her tale was done neither Lee Purdy nor his sister had any comment to make; in their mental reactions these two seemed curiously alike. They each possessed in bounteous measure the priceless gift of knowing when to speak and when to be silent.

Hallie shattered the nervous tension by announcing that the class would now be dismissed, not to take up again until Tommy Scaife should return and he and his co-conspirator, Joaquin José Ramon Oreña y Sanchez, should be asked to appear and testify to the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

"You're right, Hallie," her brother assented. "You're always right. I loathe extended post-mortems. Perhaps Miss Ormsby might be interested in seeing the new litter of English setters."

"A litter of rattlesnakes would doubtless interest Miss Ormsby if it would tend to make her feel, even for five minutes, that she is not domiciled with Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves. I have no doubt she feared that if you, Joaquin or Tommy had discovered last night that she knows that which she knows, she would have been strangled at once and her body shot down through an oubliette into the subterranean chamber where we store our dead. Poor dear! Come,

Gail. I'll show you the setter puppies and some adorable Scotties."

"Won't you come with us, Major?" Gail asked timidly.

He flashed her a grateful glance, for he realized that, for reasons best known to herself, she felt kindlier toward him now. "Thanks, no, Miss Ormsby. I've got to do some very profound thinking. Please excuse me."

He bowed to both girls and disappeared inside the house; before Hallie and her guest had left the patio somebody commenced playing the grand piano in the living-room. Hallie listened a moment, smiling maternally.

"Lee's in trouble," she vouchsafed. "Whenever things get too thick for him he wanders to the piano and plays 'La Golondrina.'"

"Haunting, mournful air, isn't it, Hallie?"

"Yes. That's why I know things are getting thick. It suits his mood. Poor old Lee. He hasn't had such a good time out of life, you know."

"I do not know, of course," Gail admitted. "But I'd like to know. One may be pardoned, Hallie, for expressing some curiosity as to the history and antecedents of one's hosts. I made bold to read last night the 'Genealogy of the Purdy Family of Worcester, Massachusetts.'"

"Well, then, of course you know that the only interesting event in my life was my birth. Nothing important has ever happened in my life since, except when I contracted tuberculosis. Lee recognized the symptoms in time and brought me out here."

"You are his half-sister, Hallie?"

Hallie bowed her head affirmatively. "Oh, but he's a brother and a half to me, Gail! Lee was a big boy when I was born—thirteen years old, I believe. A solitary little boy in a big house—and I have often thought that between him and my mother there was little in common. When he was eighteen and I was five my mother died—and then I was a solitary little girl in a big house. I think Lee must have understood my position better than anybody else could; he became very fond of me after mother's death threw us so much together. I have two half-brothers older than Lee, but they're—very different. Besides, they were married and had children of their own. Even after Lee went to Boston Tech he used to come home on week-ends; he gave me everything my father and governess forbade me to have; he helped me with my lessons and taught me to skate. Then he graduated as a mining engineer and went West to take a post-graduate course, as he said, mucking in a mine."

"Do you mean he went to work as a laborer?"

"Oh, yes! Lee was never very self-conscious socially. He held that theory was an asset but that without practice it was worse than a liability. He got his first position as a mine superintendent in Mexico. The bandits or revolutionists or whatever they are attacked the mine and killed most of his crew, and Lee escaped and made his way to El Paso. When he got there he was hungry and penniless, so he went to work for a cattle company as cook on the round-up. You see, Gail, one doesn't have to be a very wonderful cook on a round-up—just expert at a

few simple dishes. Later he joined the Texas Rangers and after he left the Rangers he and Link Hallowell and Tommy Scaife went into the cattle business along the Mexican border. They weren't very successful at it, so when the Great War occurred the three enlisted. Tommy Scaife, who had a bent for machinery, became a motor mechanic in Lee's flying squadron, so after the war Lee taught Tommy how to fly and gave him his present job, and Link became Lee's range boss. The three are devoted to each other."

"So I gathered, Hallie. Tommy is not an educated or refined man, I thought. What sort of man is Mr. Hallowell?"

"Link is about Lee's age and born and raised in Arizona. He's been through high school, he's been everywhere and seen everything. He was manager of an *estancia* in the Argentine once; Link says they used to brand forty thousand calves on the round-up. He had some sort of trouble with his employer and came back to Texas, where he met Lee. Link's awfully nice, and Lee says he's the smartest, coolest man in a pinch and the most enduring friend anybody ever had."

While Hallie talked she had led Gail outside the patio and along the path toward the kennels, which were situated farther up the mesa near the hangar. They spent half an hour with the dogs and went on to the barn, where Hallie showed Gail an Arabian mare which Link and Tommy had purchased at a sheriff's sale when a stranded three-car circus had got into difficulties in Albuquerque.

"She cost the two darlings a month's pay each, but they wanted her for me, and of course they had to

have her. Tommy made me a beautiful horsehair hitching rope and Link plaited me a perfectly wonderful bridle from soft rawhide; the other boys sent to Pueblo, Colorado, and had a saddle made for me. It's silver-chased and all stamped and carved leather, and Lee says he thinks I'll be strong enough to use all their gifts soon. I know they're dying to see me on parade."

So that was the reverse of the shield, the soft side of these two hard men who guarded Lee Purdy and slew his enemies for hire. Gail was forced to admit to herself that, as killers, they appeared capable of an unusual excess of affection, loyalty and devotion; conversely, she reminded herself that the man who could inspire such sentiments toward himself and his sister must be possessed of qualities that raised him far above the level of the common run of men.

She recalled now, with a little pang of regret for her ready acceptance of it, that Ira Todd had brought a blanket indictment against Lee Purdy, whereas Purdy had said nothing ill of Todd—in fact, had gone out of his way to enumerate the latter's good points; when forced to avow a grievance against Todd he had brought a definite indictment and was prepared to prosecute it vigorously and in the open. It occurred to Gail now that Ira Todd had expressed no intention or willingness to prosecute his blanket indictment of Purdy, in the open or otherwise; apparently he had been concerned wholly with the problem of eradicating the excellent impression he must have known Purdy and his sister would make upon her at the outset of their acquaintance.

She patted the Arabian mare and admired her, but

in the back of her mind she found a rising admiration for the grim audacity, the Machiavellian sense of humor, which had moved Tommy Scaife to drop that dead man into the barnyard of the Box K Ranch. Had Ira Todd engaged that dead man to do a mischief on La Cuesta Encantada and had Tommy Scaife and Joaquin, realizing this, returned the fellow to his employer in that ghastly manner, as a warning to Ira Todd to cease future operations? Gail wondered.

The two girls strolled about the Enchanted Hill for half an hour and returned to the hacienda, to discover that Purdy had retired to his office. Hallie, a little weary from her unaccustomed physical exertion, lay on the divan in the living-room and Gail went to the piano and, to her own accompaniment, sang for Hallie a number of German and Irish folk-songs. Gail had a strong and wonderfully sweet contralto voice, and an excellent teacher had made the most of it; as she sang for Hallie, Lee Purdy appeared and stood silently in the doorway, listening.

"Isn't her voice a duplicate of——" Hallie began, and then sat up to stare into her brother's smiling face.

"No, it isn't, Hallie," he contradicted. "It's the same voice, and this is the same Miss Gail Ormsby we've enjoyed listening to over the radio for months past. Miss Ormsby, haven't you been broadcasting from Los Angeles?"

Gail nodded, blushing pleasurably. "I'm a very helpless person, Major. Educated music lovers and grand-opera impresarios will have none of me, but I seem to please the people who own radios. I have

almost supported myself singing since my father died."

Purdy crossed to the divan, sat beside his sister and took her hand in his. "And to think we had the original package with us and almost permitted it to be sent away, unopened!" he reminded her. "Of course, Hallie, I do not grade high in Miss Ormsby's estimation, but I have a suspicion you do. Do you think you can induce her to sing 'Deep River' for a couple of cow-county hayseeds?"

"I think so, Lee. Of course if she refuses we will not be responsible for anything that may happen to her."

"Joaquin would probably cut her ears off," he replied seriously. "And of course Tommy Scaife would then take her over to the Box K Ranch and dump her out into her own back yard. I think, Hallie, that if she's wise she'll sing for her life."

"Boy, you said something," Hallie answered slangily. "We'll give her a minute to catch her breath after that throat-straining German song—then she'll sing 'Deep River' for you or take the consequences, darling."

Gail's heart lilted at their careless badinage. Villain this man Purdy might be, but amiable and likable withal; and though Hallie's sister love had blinded her to his shortcomings, yet Gail could understand that and think rather more of little Hallie for her blindness.

"Oh, well, if you insist!" she told the brother and sister. "I suppose I'll have to do it. I realize you have me in your power." And she sang Burleigh's tremendous negro spiritual as she had never sung it before.

"All is now forgiven," Purdy assured her. "Hereafter you have my permission to snoop at all hours, unmolested, around my private murder pens; you may even take motion pictures of the murders and the subsequent removal of the bodies."

"Thank you," she replied, relapsing into the same careless, bantering mood. "In return for this privilege I'll come to the window of your cell and sing to you the night before you're hanged."

Hallie's face, drolly serious, was turned to her brother's. "I think the girl will make a hand if we give her time," she suggested.

"We'll be very patient with her, Hallie. She's a direct importation from another world and it may require a longer period than two weeks to gentle her, although it seems to me we halter-broke her this afternoon."

"We'll make her bridlewise tomorrow, Lee."

"She thought she was well up on Wild West stuff, Hallie. Had the audacity to tell me she'd learned it watching cowboys killing each other in Hollywood."

"Do you mean in the moving pictures, Lee?"

"I do."

"The poor dear! I wonder if she thinks we get our cowboys from a mail-order house."

"I dare say."

"Wa-all, Lee, we'll learn the gal a thing er two. Tell her what you did to the Montgomery, Ward Company cowboy who came up here wearing one of those five-gallon hats and the goatskin chaps in midsummer."

Lee Purdy stared coldly at their guest. "We fed that boy to the hogs," he replied. "Hogs all died,"

he added as an afterthought, and Gail laughed. Hallie and her brother exchanged significant glances and Hallie nodded perkily in Gail's direction.

"Bridlewise already," she said in a loud whisper. "I told you we'd learn the gal."

CHAPTER XVIII

AT SUNSET Tommy Scaife came down over the mesa with his prisoner, turned both their horses into the corral and herding the Mexican before him walked down to the hacienda. With the assurance of a privileged employee he entered the patio and confronted Purdy, Hallie and Gail seated on the veranda feeding peanuts to a family of gray squirrels that occupied the hollow trunk of an oak tree in the patio garden, from which area of safety they were wont to scold the Purdy dogs outside the wall.

"Hello, Tommy, whom have you here?" Purdy saluted his man.

"I don't know whom we have, Lee," the little man replied blithely, "but I mighty well know what we have here. We've got the *hombre* who picked this ranch to camp on last night without consultin' me first. Ain't he a sweet-lookin' article?" Tommy fixed Gail with his bleak eyes. "How'd you like to wake up some night, Miss Ormsby, an' find that face hangin' over you?"

The girl shuddered, and Tommy smiled, enjoying her horror. He turned to Purdy.

"Lee, I don't suppose you folks have heard what took place up on the Middle Fork yesterday morning after you dropped Steve MacDougald and his dog at Bear Tooth's rancheria?"

"No, what happened?"

"Somebody bushwhacked Steve. I'm sorry to have to tell you, Miss Hallie, but it can't be kept a secret. Poor old Steve has went before."

Purdy's arms opened to receive his sister, who had turned to him instinctively. He held her close while she sobbed out her grief on his breast; nor did he make any effort to comfort her; when Gail would have attempted this he signified his unwillingness.

"Tears help hurt hearts to mend. Those who cannot weep are those who suffer longest."

He tucked the fair head down into the hollow of his shoulder and patted the frail thin shoulders, while Tommy scuffed one foot against the other and from time to time glanced at his prisoner as if he meditated throttling him on the spot. The man's wild eyes grew wilder; he trembled and twitched and little rivulets of perspiration, starting under his hatband, ran down his soiled, unshaven and leathery cheek. He voiced a protest in Spanish, but ceased when Tommy Scaife raised his hand and threatened to smite him across the mouth with the back of it.

The first gust of Hallie's woe was over, and Purdy called Conchita, who took charge of her young mistress and led the sobbing girl inside. When Purdy's anxious and troubled glance had seen the last of his sister, he set a chair for Gail and himself; Tommy sat down on the edge of the veranda and the prisoner, unable longer to maintain himself erect, collapsed beside his captor.

"I hated to tell Miss Hallie, Lee," Tommy confessed huskily. "You know what good friends her an' Steve

was—him always havin' a pet coon or a wolf pup or a bear cub to show her whenever she was able to fly over to his cabin with you, an' her sendin' me over with apple pies she'd about killed herself bakin' for him on days she felt up to the job. Steve always had some yarn to spin to her about his trees an' what-all—darned if he wasn't a nature-lovin' fool. I reckon he didn't believe all the things he told Hallie, but on account of her never havin' been well enough to ride through the Cuyamaca with us on the round-up, Steve liked to try makin' her see his world through his eyes."

"Sometimes I think the old boy succeeded, Tommy. Steve was a good man and a good friend. Peace to his ashes. Now then, tell us all about it."

"All I got to go on is guess-work, Lee."

"But why should anybody want to kill Steve? He hadn't an enemy in the world. Those Basque shepherds who run in their sheep on the reserve every chance they get knew it wouldn't do to kill him. His death would not have meant that they could pasture on the reserve without being disturbed. They knew another ranger would come and another and another—they knew the Forest Ranger Service and that it can't be bought or fooled."

"That's why Steve was killed—because he couldn't be bought or fooled. I figure it out this way, Lee. The day before yesterday Jim Presbery got word from Washington he was transferred to the Shoshone National Forest in Montana and Steve MacDougald promoted to supervisor in charge of the Cuyamaca. Presbery took the good news to Arguello with him when he went to get the doctor for one of his children.

Maybe he told Ira Todd about it. Now, you know Presbery has always been mighty quick to quote the rules to you; seemed to me he complained to Washington a good deal about your grazin' permit an' generally speakin' he ain't been none too friendly. Well, this year your cows are up in the reserve two weeks ahead of the official openin' of the grazin' season, an' I reckon Todd figured on inducin' Presbery to make quite an issue o' that. Not that I think Jim Presbery'll take sides but just because he naturally yearns to let folks know he's supervisor of the Cuyamaca Reserve. He's like a policeman that keeps on tellin' folks to move on when they're a-movin' as fast as they can. He's the sort o' man that figures if he's sendin' in reports an' complaints, the Chief Forester'll think he's a good man an' make him a district supervisor. Probably got the advertisin' habit."

"I think you have Jim Presbery sized up right, Tommy."

"Now, Steve was a practical man. He'd kill his own snakes an' leave the Chief Forester in peace. An' he was your good friend. You told him you were goin' to set your cattle driftin' ahead o' time an' why—an' he said he didn't suppose he'd have any business over on that part of his territory until after the official openin' anyhow, so what he couldn't see wouldn't worry him. Steve was one o' them wise owls who knows that once in a while it's a blessin' owls can't see in strong daylight.

"Now, with Presbery out an' MacDougald in, Todd's chance to put over a real complaint on you an' make it stick with witnesses was gone, unless Presbery

could be retained on the supervisor's job. So he ordered Steve killed. When a feller once embarks in the killin' game a man or two extra or the lack of a big reason don't matter.

"Lee, it would have puzzled me to know why they waited to get Steve up on the Middle Fork before bushwhackin' him, instead of goin' straight to his cabin, if I hadn't had a funny little experience last night." And forthwith Tommy Scaife proceeded to relate to his employer his story of the attempt to cripple the airplanes, the poisoning of the dog Rory, the capture and killing of the marauder by Joaquin and the subsequent disposal of the body.

"Of course, we had to get rid of the corpus delicti, which is what they prove a killin' with," he explained. "No corpse, no killin', *comprende, amigo mío?* I ain't no coroner nor yet no undertaker, Lee."

Lee Purdy gazed upon his man and sighed deeply. Tommy threw back his head and laughed, for he could always see a deal of humor in the unexpected and terrible occurring to anybody he did not like.

"Did you recognize the wretch, Tommy?"

"I should tell a man! He wasn't nobody else but that quarter-bred nigger that stomped on my toe yesterday afternoon in Arguello."

"No!"

"*Seguro, señor.* When he seen me in Arguello yesterday afternoon flyin' the ship he'd doctored the day before, I'll bet he says to himself: 'Why, I reckon I didn't saw them struts deep enough. I got to go back tonight an' do a better job.' So he hops in a flivver an' beats it out here—an' now he's gone where the

woodbine twineth an' the whangdoodle mourneth for its mate! Oh Death, where is thy sting? Oh Grave, where is thy victory?" And now Tommy Scaife's cachinnation was a full-throated, masculine bellow.

Horror showed in Purdy's eyes. "Was it *that* ship?" he gasped.

"It sure enough was, boss, which leads me back to my sheeps, as the little French shepherd remarked. Yesterday was our regular patrol day; everybody in this country knows we give the Cuyamaca the once-over every Sunday; that it's your habit to take over the Sunday patrol an' on your way back drop in on Bob Fordney an' his wife on the Little Cottonwood for dinner."

Purdy nodded. Tommy resumed. "Now, you're like all war-trained aviators. You fly high an' when you see anything down below that looks interestin' you just naturally make a dive for it. The idea was, then, to plant you with a little fire an' a lot of smoke on the Middle Fork, where the timber is thick as fur on a cat's back. Then when you dove down from fifteen thousand feet to see if that fire was protected or abandoned, the sudden extra strain would have snapped them weak struts, your wings would have buckled up an' you would have been disposed of quietly, cleanly, an' scientifically, without fuss or feathers. Unless somebody stumbled across the wreck during the round-up next fall you might never be found, and of course everybody in the county would say, 'Wa-al, I knew that fool Purdy'd git it sooner or later. Cow-men had ought to stick to cow-ponies.' "

Lee Purdy was very thoughtful now. "How come

you didn't follow program, Lee?" Tommy queried with mirth in his buttermilk eyes.

"I had Miss Ormsby with me," Purdy answered—and shuddered. "I would have dived if I hadn't feared to frighten her—so I came down very gradually, in wide circles. I—good Lord, Tommy, what if I had killed her?"

"You wouldn't never know nothin' about it," the philosophical Scaife reminded him. "An' wouldn't Ira Todd an' his gang have been grateful for two birds with one stone?" His jolly laugh rang out again before he resumed. "Well, this killer was waitin' on the hillside to watch you come down, an' if you wasn't killed he was there to finish you. An' if the wreck took fire, his orders was to put it out because Todd can't afford a forest fire this early in the season any more than you can. Well, sure enough you found the bait, but somehow you slipped off the hook. He saw you fly straight south an' I suppose he guessed you was gone to notify Steve MacDougald, because Steve's station was the only one you could land at on your way home. Before he could get nervous waitin' for your next move he seen you flyin' back, so he sat down where he was an' smoked cigarettes an' every little while he'd walk down the hill an' tend his fire, pilin' damp moss on it so's the smoke could be seen for miles.

"Finally Steve comes up the trail. He fills his canteen in the creek, climbs out, leans his rifle against a tree an' stands facin' uphill an' pourin' water on the fire, when the killer busts him. Steve staggers back over the bank into the creek an' he's so dead when the

killer comes down to look him over that the scoundrel concludes to rob him too. Yes, his pockets was turned inside out—nothin' in them."

"That was done to provide the sheriff with a motive for the killing—robbery—rather than the real motive which might lead to the man higher up. And they picked the Middle Fork because they knew some Basques were in there trespassing with sheep—and suspicion might very readily point to them."

"I reckon he *was* throwin' dust in the air," Tommy agreed. "Well, unfortunately for their plans, Jim Presbery telephoned here last night to tell us to keep our eyes open for any stranger ridin' by this way. You got to give Jim credit for being a good policeman, like all of them rangers; it was too dark for him to do anything after the body was found yesterday evening after sunset, but he had the sheriff out an' the two of them was on the job bright an' early this mornin'. However, I was so curious I got there first an' I didn't stay long. The killer'd blazed a trail like an army marchin' through a grain field, I followed it, an' here's the bright young man that did the job. Havin' failed to get you as per the original specifications, he come over here a-speculatin' on sneakin' down from the mesa at night an' bustin' you through the window or maybe up at the hangar. A shot from out in the sage at four or five hundred yards would have fixed your clock, Lee."

Lee Purdy turned a little and gazed upon Gail Ormsby coolly, triumphantly. "Well, Miss Ormsby, do you think that killing last night was justified?" he asked. She nodded, and he continued. "Of course,

dropping the body at your ranch was Tommy's idea of humor, but at that it may have a mighty salutary effect. Tommy, this man was camped twenty-five miles from the scene of the murder when you picked him up. How do you connect him with the crime?"

"As easy as killin' rats in a granary with the door shut, Lee. It ain't no job at all to figger it out. I see by Steve's footprints that he's bendin' over the fire puttin' it out with water when this *hombre* busts him. He's facin' uphill at the time an' bendin' a little an' I can tell from the angle of the course o' the bullet that it was fired downhill. So I climb uphill an' look for sign. I find where the killer has set in a clump of buck-brush, rested his rifle in the crotch of a limb an' shot from a rest. The crotch is chafed a little. An' I know the feller has been settin' there a long time because his cigarette butts is pretty prevalent. Also, I find the empty cartridge. It's a forty-five-seventy an' I can tell from the shape of the shell it's mighty old-fashioned.

"Well, the only old-fashioned rifle of that caliber that I've ever seen is the United States Army Springfield, model of eighteen hundred and seventy-three. They were retired when the army took up the Krag-Jorgensen an' now you can buy them old Springfields for three dollars each in the stores where they sell obsolete, condemned an' excess army an' navy goods. I remembered some smart trader bought up a lot of them an' sold them to the Mexican revolutionists in nineteen hundred and fourteen. They was mostly carbines, because as you know, Lee, a Mexican won't fight on foot if he can rustle up a horse. So the

thought struck me that mebbe this killer was a Mexican. Then I happened to smell some of his cigarette butts an' I was sure of it."

"Yes, Tommy, the man is undoubtedly addicted to marihuana."

"What's that?" Gail queried.

"It's a drug—a member of the cantharides family—a hemp product, a cousin to hasheesh. It's the curse of Mexico, as opium is the curse of China and heroin, cocaine and morphine the curse of the United States and Europe. The use of it leads inevitably to insanity; quite generally it induces a homicidal mania; it will make a courageous and insensate brute out of a humane coward; it destroys all sense of moral values and consequently men seeking to engage killers in this country find them in marihuana fiends as readily as the New York gang leader finds them in cocaine fiends. The drug is mixed with tobacco and smoked in cigarettes. Go on, Tommy."

"Of course I knew then, Lee, that the killer was a thin, nervous, half-crazy Mexican, and when I found a neat, clear imprint of his boot in the mud and sand along the Middle Fork a mile below where he'd killed Steve, I knew from the size of it he was a small light man. In the willows at this point I found where a horse had been tied an' in the bark of one of the trees I found a short yellow hair and a long black one, so I knew his horse was a buckskin with black mane and tail. I found four clear hoof-prints of the horse and saw that he had cast one shoe an' was pigeon-toed in his left front foot. I figgered no man in a hurry to ride out of a country would risk a barefooted horse

on our kind of ground; if the horse had cast one shoe it was time he was reshod all around anyhow. The nearest horseshoer was at San Simeon, so I went there and sure 'nough this here libel on the human race had been there an' got his horse shod all around.

"From the blacksmith shop he went over to the general store an' laid in a skillet, a coffee-pot an' some grub for him an' his horse an' give it out in both places that he was headed over toward the Rio Puerco country lookin' for a job. As far as I could find out nobody had asked him where he was headed because nobody give a hoot. So I figgered he was lyin' an' then, rememberin' that little flicker of a camp-fire I'd noticed last night as I come flyin' in at dusk with Miss Ormsby, the thought comes to me that mebbe the young man has come over to La Cuesta Encantada to bump you off an' was in camp there. So I fly around until I spot his horse, hobbled an' waxin' fat on the Purdy grass about two miles from here; naturally I put up the ship, mount up on a horse, go forth an' bring the boy in. I ain't frisked him yet. Let's see what he's got belongin' to Steve."

With an expert hand Tommy Scaife went through his prisoner's pockets and brought forth a gold wrist watch, some loose silver and bills, a box of matches and three packages of cigarettes.

"Guilty as charged," Lee Purdy murmured. "Hallie gave Steve that watch last Christmas. He had had an old silver watch but had lost it and Hallie begged from me one of two wrist watches I accumulated during the war and gave it to Steve. Have you talked to this man, Tommy? We may get a confession."

"Ain't no use talkin' to him now, Lee. He's got enough Indian blood in him to stick by his story, whatever it may be. I sort o' had an idea I'd lock him up in the smoke-house an' cut off his ration o' marihuana until he begins actin' reasonable. I reckon he'll tell us who hired him if we're a mite patient, Lee."

Purdy smiled sadly and Tommy, with a sly glance at Gail Ormsby, snickered openly.

"By the way, Lee," he continued, "I never heard that Steve had willed his dog to anybody, so I took possession of him on behalf of Miss Hallie. I reckon Steve would have wanted her to get him."

"Thank you for that, Tommy. You're always kind and thoughtful."

Tommy Scaife gripped his prisoner by the nape and jerked the wretched trembling man erect. "Come on, boy. Let's go," he said. Then, glancing back at Lee and Gail: "His rifle is an eighteen hundred and seventy-three model Springfield army carbine and the empty shell I found fits it."

Purdy nodded and as Tommy disappeared through the patio gate he whistled to the gray squirrels, which returned confidently to his lap for their interrupted evening meal of peanuts.

When the last peanut had been distributed to the squirrels and the little mendicants had departed for home, Lee Purdy stood up, glanced critically at the sky as if making a weather forecast, turned to go into the house and started, surprised to see Gail still sitting watching him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't intend to ignore

your presence. I grow a bit absent-minded when I'm thinking hard."

"I've been waiting here for you to say something."

"I haven't anything to say."

"Most men would, under the circumstances. I had expected to be scolded and had made up my mind to accept the scolding in good part."

"Why should I scold you?"

"Because I haven't been a good sport. I have employed the old feminine weapons to force my will upon you. I have preyed upon your goodness of heart; I have sought to arouse your chivalry by urging my helplessness and dependence upon Mr. Todd. I was low enough to ask a favor of you, whom I feared and despised—and I had not scrupled to conceal my feeling toward you."

He smiled tolerantly. "I must claim the privilege of forgiving you, if I desire, Miss Ormsby. And I see nothing unreasonable in admiring one who despises me. At least you were frank and courageous and I always admire those qualities in any human being."

"I am sorry I was so horrid to you last night."

"I'm glad you are sorry."

"Aren't you a little bit sorry you—ah—rough-housed me?"

"Not at all. You earned your rough-housing! I'm only sorry you made rough-housing necessary."

"There is a hard, cold, inflexible quality in your nature, Major Purdy."

"I flatter myself I'm not a human oyster. Still I try not to be cruel, overbearing, tyrannical or unjust."

"I must say I haven't found you so."

"Perhaps then I may hazard the hope that, even though you despise me now, I am in a fair way to earn your respect ultimately. I'm a patient man. I know how to wait."

"Did you really make up your mind, following your unfortunate encounter with Mr. Todd in the restaurant, that you must kill him unless he complied with your ultimatum?"

"I did," he replied sadly. "Once in a lifetime such decisions must be made by men whose fate is not so fortuitous as they themselves could desire. I shall take no joy in the job; indeed, I imagine I shall feel, when the issue is finally joined, as I felt toward a dog I once was forced to destroy. He was an ordinarily good dog but he would kill calves."

"Well, I release you from your promise to spare your enemy for two weeks."

He was amazed. "Thank you," he replied gravely. "That is a great relief to me."

"You appear to be engaged in a war not entirely of your own seeking," the girl went on. "It isn't fair of me to handicap your defense unless at the same time I handicap your enemy's attack."

He nodded affirmation. "You are going to plead with Todd to accept my ultimatum in order to spare his own life?"

"No. It has just occurred to me that I haven't the slightest right to ask him to do something that may be in direct contravention of his private code. I begin to think that the doctrine of personal responsibility is a sound one and that in the issue between you and Mr. Todd I can have no possible interest. He

should be permitted to arrive at his own decisions unhampered by considerations of my welfare. I do not think that the laws of hospitality presuppose, on your part, a consideration of any interests paramount to your own."

"So you have decided to remain neutral?"

She nodded.

"Would you prefer that I emerge victorious, Miss Ormsby?"

"That is not a proper subject for discussion now."

"Have you any other reason for giving Todd and me permission to riddle each other?"

"Yes," she answered bravely. "You would cut much too ignoble a figure in the rôle of a skulker."

He arched his eyebrows in pleased appreciation. "It appears to me you'll soon be back where you were before you had your illuminating interview with Todd," he suggested slyly.

She shook her bright brown head. "I am helpless and ignorant of my own business affairs. I require help and advice and I can trust neither of the two men who have offered it."

"You have a curious habit of letting the tail go with the hide, Miss Ormsby. Please permit me to advise you once more. Under no circumstances trust me, but continue to trust Ira Todd until you catch him out of bounds."

"Why do you not wish me to trust you?"

"That is not a proper subject for discussion now," he flung back at her, without resentment.

Her eyes were wistful. "But it *would* please you to have me trust you, wouldn't it?"

"Of course it would. But until that day when you shall come to me voluntarily and ask me to help you and advise you I prefer to play a lone hand."

"I wonder if that day will ever come?"

"*Quién sabe!* Something tells me that my unknown enemies are desirous of acquiring your ranch also, and that their purpose can only be served by acquiring both ranches simultaneously; therefore, it seems to me that, to this extent at least, your fortunes are linked with mine; that when the blow falls on me it will fall on you. If I succeed in disposing, successfully, of my enemies, I think I will have, automatically, disposed of yours. Then, perhaps, you will know whom to trust."

Gail's lips trembled. "Already the blows are beginning to fall upon me," she faltered. "I have lost every dollar I possess; all I can do now is to wait bravely for the blow that is to finish me."

"Fortunately, I am not so helpless, Miss Ormsby. Before the next blow falls on me I shall make one experiment to determine whether Ira Todd has instigated the annoyance and persecution to which I have been subjected for a year; and if that experiment succeeds I shall know that no more blows will fall upon either of us."

Her face lighted hopefully. "I wonder if I might know the nature of the experiment?"

"Certainly. I shall fly over to your ranch and kill your manager. If the annoyance and persecution ceases with his death, I shall know that my experiment was a howling success."

"You're positively ghastly. Do you really mean it?"

He laughed so softly she did not know whether he meant it or not.

"But suppose the annoyance and persecution should *not* cease with Mr. Todd's death?" she persisted.

"Well, of course, that would be a not very regrettable case of mistaken identity." His tone was light and bantering.

"Major," she flashed at him, "we're not getting anywhere."

"Oh! Are we trying to get somewhere?"

"Please do not pretend dulness. I had hoped we might be en route to a better understanding."

He reached forth, impulsively, and, with that maddening debonair smile of his, touching her hand gently, replied:

"My dear, it occurs to me we've reached our destination!"

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Jake Dort parted with Lee Purdy outside the door of the hospital room in which Ira Todd lay considering the various aspects of the unpleasant hole into which he had precipitated himself, there was tumult in the soul of the range boss. While calling upon the sheriff to be sworn in as a deputy, he had heard, from this authoritative source, the details of Todd's encounter with Purdy in Chan's restaurant.

Later, as Jake crossed the street to the office of the justice of the peace to swear out a writ of attachment on the Box K caballada, he met a man who had been present during the episode and from him confirmed the tale which the sheriff had told him. Thereafter the issue was, to Jake Dort, as clear as if he beheld it already consummated; following his brief interview with Purdy there was absolutely no doubt in Jake's mind but that there was, as he expressed it to Ira Todd a moment later, "blood on the moon."

"I reckon there is, Jake," Todd had replied easily, "but I aim to make certain it will not be any of my blood."

"You must 'a' been jingled, Iry," Jake declared, "otherwise you wouldn't have spit in Purdy's face an' give out that rotten dig about his sister. *That's* something you've got to answer for."

"Well, I did have a couple under my belt," Todd confessed, "but drunk or sober I would have acted the same. I'm out to run that skunk out of this country and I might as well supply my own excuse."

"I don't reckon, somehow, there'll be any runnin', Iry," Jake replied plaintively. "I've heard a lot of ornery things about Purdy but I've never heard tell he'd run, an' if I'm any jedge of a man that young feller can't run fast enough to work up a good healthy sweat. Iry, you got to apologize the way he wants you should or argy the matter in the smoke. There ain't no two ways about that. *There can't be!*"

"I won't apologize an' I won't argue," Todd declared defiantly. "It's his next move and I'm waiting, with some interest, to see what move he'll make."

"Iry," Jake pleaded, "your head needs fixin'. You sure do need to consult a phrenologist. You got your orders from Purdy an' if you don't obey 'em Purdy just naturally ain't got no choice 'ceptin' to enforce 'em in the usual way. An' they tell me he's the fastest, coolest, straightest wing shot, with either hand, in the hull state of New Mexico. Iry, you aimin' to commit suicide?"

Todd laughed nervously. "Don't you worry none about me, Jake," he soothed his foreman. "I'm tellin' you this Purdy's a windbag. I don't say he might not start something in the heat of anger, but if I give him a couple of days to cool down he'll be mighty glad to forget that affair in the restaurant. Reckon I'll get out of this hospital and ride back to the ranch with you."

Jake's wild eyebrows went up. He stared for half

a minute at his chief. "Looks to me like as if you're runnin', Iry," he announced coldly.

"Well, what do you expect me to do, Jake? Lie around this hotel until the first day I get out and have Purdy or one of his killers beef me at a time when I'm not physically able to give myself an even break? When I'm fit to hold my own, Jake, I'll come back to Arguello. Don't you worry none about that."

"Well, you're either crazy or a sight better shot than I know you are," Jake declared. "What you done to Purdy wasn't no credit to you, Iry, and there's folks in this town mighty free to say they hope he busts you for it and that right soon."

"He swallowed what I had to say an' what I did to him," Todd blustered. But Jake was not to be put off by any such argument.

"If a man done to me what you did to Purdy," he replied, "I'd know then an' there that sooner or later I'd have to kill you. Bein' unarmed an' not havin' any of my own friends present, I'd swaller your dirt myself—not because I was afraid, but because any time I'd make up my mind I had to kill a man I'd name the time an' the place myself! Iry, for the last time I'm tellin' you. You take program from Purdy or before long you'll be six feet from some flowers you can't smell. Iry, I'm tellin' you!"

"When I need your advice, Jake, I'll ask for it," Todd countered.

Jake's red face glowed a darker red. "So you're goin' to send a killer out after Purdy, eh?" he queried.

"What makes you think that?" Todd demanded quickly.

"Well, you're runnin' away from this hospital right after Purdy put the buck up to you, and ten minutes ago you was askin' me to kill Purdy for you or give up your gun so's you could do the job yourself, although you knew Purdy wasn't heeled. Iry, it occurs to me all of a sudden that you got an orange stripe runnin' clear through you. You won't take program from Purdy an' you won't fight him an' you're plumb yellow, so the only way out for you is to hire some skunk to beef Purdy before he beefs you." His baleful eye appraised Todd. "Iry," he continued, "you an' me've been friends a good many years an' I must say I've been happy workin' under you, but I'm free to tell you that if Purdy was a friend o' mine I'd tell him to come an' git you before your killer could git him."

"You must be drunk, Jake," Todd growled without anger. He climbed out of bed, prowled around the room on trembling legs, seeking his clothing, while Jake sat and glared at him like a malevolent old dog. Half an hour later the two men, in a hired automobile, were en route to the Box K Ranch. They rode in silence, although several times Todd essayed to strike up a conversation on some commonplace subject. Jake resolutely declined the bait, however, and slipped deeper and deeper into a mood of melancholy.

As they drove into the yard of the Box K Ranch, Pete Howe strolled out to meet them. "Hello, Iry," he said. "What's happened to your head?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow morning, Pete. All I've got to say to you tonight is that Jake is still foreman of this ranch."

"I guess that settles the argyment," Pete returned pleasantly. "If it's all the same to you, boss, I reckon I'll have my time in the morning."

"You ride over to La Cuesta Encantada and ask Miss Ormsby for your time," Todd flung at him. "Jake's put a plaster on the *caballada* to protect his claim, the bank account is overdrawn and the cattle are mortgaged. You collect the best way you know how, Pete."

"Well, you know mighty well I won't pick on that girl for it."

Pete returned to the bunk-house; Jake Dort repaired to his quarters, and after dismissing the driver of the car Ira Todd went to his, closed the door behind him and for the first time in his life—locked it.

During the night he was awakened from a troubled slumber by the roaring of a motor and the weird shrieking of a siren. He struck a match and looked at his watch. It was a quarter of one. What under the canopy did Lee Purdy or his man Scaife mean by hovering over the Box K Ranch at such an hour? With wildly beating heart Todd crept out of bed and possessed himself of a rifle; then, sitting in the darkness on the edge of his bed, he awaited the arrival of his enemy.

Presently a knock sounded on the door. "Who's there?" Todd challenged hoarsely. "Speak or I'll let you have it."

"It's Jake. Purdy or his man Scaife has been flyin' over the ranch an' dropped a message for you. It's lyin' out here. Come out an' take a look at it, Iry."

Ira Todd came forth and Jake led him to the group of cow-hands who, clad in their underclothes, clustered around the battered body of a dead man.

"He had a sack tied around his head," Jake explained, "but I cut that off'n him. None o' the boys here know him, although Pete Howe says he saw the feller playin' pitch in the card-room of the Arguello hotel this afternoon, with three other strangers."

Jake flashed an electric torch on the gory face of the dead man and Todd shuddered and clutched the foreman's arm. In the moonlight his face was ghastly; he appeared about to faint, so Jake and Pete Howe assisted him back to his bed, where the foreman dismissed Pete, lighted the kerosene lamp and sat regarding his superior officer.

"Well, I *was* right after all, wasn't I?" he said presently. "You'd sent your killer after Purdy already, so no wonder you could afford to be spunky—or crazy —I dunno which. An' I wasn't far off the target when I called you yaller, becuz you are yaller! You're scared silly right now an' I'm here to tell you, Todd, you got good reason to be. That flyin' man was Tommy Scaife an' he's the feller, most likely, that captures your killer. Mebbe he makes the feller talk some before bustin' him through the head with a six-shooter. Anyhow, I'm layin' you ten to one Lee Purdy or Tommy Scaife will be callin' on you inside of twelve hours. It don't make no difference now whether your man killed Purdy or not. We *know* Scaife is alive an' kickin', an' while Scaife's in that interestin' condition your life ain't worth the price of a bartender's mistake!

"Beef Scaife, an' you got Hallowell to reckon with. Beef Hallowell, damn your dog's heart, Iry Todd, an' you got me!" Jake's mighty fist smashed down on the table and the kerosene lamp fairly jumped. "When Purdy or one of his men drop in you'll come out an' meet 'em, an' you'll be wearin' a six gun, *sabe?* Nobody here is goin' to protect you an' if you won't come out an' fight like a man, I'll set this here shack afire an' drive you out."

Jake tossed Todd's six-shooter on the table and stalked out and back to his bed, where he sat for an hour, with his bruised face in his hands.

"I got to see her an' him," he kept mumbling to himself. "I can't have 'em think I'm playin' *all* of Iry's dirty game. I've played enough of it, but here's where I quit. He gets me all het up with the notion Purdy's a crook, an' when the Chink slams him over the head I'm that onreasonable I don't stop to ask questions but organize that fool necktie party of Iry's friends. Iry cheers me on. He hopes there'll be some shootin' on La Cuesta Encantada and mebbe Purdy gets killed. I reckon Iry don't care much what happens to me. He puts me up to blockin' the girl's plans by attachin' her *caballada* . . . well, I can't play the game with the yaller pup. I ain't no doctor of divinity, but if ever the necessity rises I aim to kill my own snakes or get bit to death a-tryin'. . . . Quite so, Mr. Dort. There's something rotten in Denmark an' I ain't goin' to be a party to it."

It was daylight before Jake fell into a troubled sleep. When the sun streaming through his tiny window awakened him, be discovered that Pete Howe had

saddled his horse and ridden from the Box K an hour previous.

Throughout the day Jake Dort sat in front of the bunk-house and scanned the sky in the direction of La Cuesta Encantada. He was certain Purdy or Tommy Scaife would call to exact the settlement and he chafed at the delay, for until the issue should be decided Jake felt that he could not, with entire legal propriety, remove the grim horror that still lay sprawled in the ranch yard. Moreover, its presence there was making him nervous.

About noon Todd emerged from his quarters, saw *It*, and recoiled as if he had been struck, but presently gathering his waning courage, he disappeared into the ranch kitchen and cooked himself some breakfast. Upon emerging from the kitchen he called to Jake to get a couple of the boys and bury *It*.

"Can't, nohow, Iry," Jake growled back. "That reminder's got to be left there for the coroner. We dassent tech it."

"Then spread a tarpaulin over *It*," Todd commanded.

"Well, might do that," Jake replied, and did it. At half past four he despaired of a killing that day, so he climbed into the ranch car and departed without telling anybody whither he was bound. Todd, still very weak and uncertain in his movements, had gone back to bed. He longed, with a great longing, to leave New Mexico that day, but Jake had taken the only available means of transportation for the present, and it would be some days before Todd could hope to straddle a horse and make a run for it. Meanwhile,

there was nothing he could do save await the arrival of Lee Purdy or Tommy Scaife. He must cross his bridge when he came to it, and (his hopes not yet all fled) after all it might not be necessary to cross it!

CHAPTER XX

CONCHITA, entering the living-room where Purdy and Gail sat, made two announcements. Dinner was served and a stranger awaited in the patio, desirous of an interview with Señor Purdy and Señorita Ormsby.

Purdy stepped across the hall to his office, possessed himself of a pistol, and returned to the living-room. "Tell him to come in, Conchita," he ordered, and stood watching the door with something of the alert interest of a terrier at a rat-hole.

Jake Dort entered presently. "Good evening, Jake," Purdy greeted him kindly. "You're welcome."

Dejection sat on the big foreman as prominently as a parrot sits on its perch. His bruised face presented now a worse appearance even than it had the day before, and the ear which Joaquin had so delicately notched was done up in a dressing absurdly too large. Jake's entrance was devoid of the old belligerent swing; his glance was on the floor; he appeared broken in spirit as he saluted them both respectfully and stood, twirling his hat in his big hands. Purdy begged him to be seated, so Jake accepted and sat scratching his head as if in great perplexity.

"Major Purdy, sir," he said presently, "I want you should know that my duties as range boss of the Box K Ranch have always been confined to ranch duties,

with the exception of that fool necktie party I headed here day before yesterday. I want you should know I've never mixed in Iry's private affairs an' what's more, I don't intend to."

"I understand your position thoroughly, Jake, and I believe every word you say. With reference to the incident which has so disturbed you, Tommy Scaife will explain that to you at dinner."

Jake grinned horribly. "I reckon I'd better keep away from that mess hall of yourn, Major," he replied. "I'm right unpopular in that quarter."

"Not at all, Jake. When you leave here, see Tommy, square yourself with him, and tell him I said he was to square you with Joaquin and take you in to dinner."

"Thanks. Miss Ormsby, I got something to say to you, if you please, ma'am. It's to your interest to listen to me, if so be you'll let me talk."

"Certainly, Mr. Dort. Proceed."

"Just as I leave the Box K this afternoon, I meet Henry Menefee of the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation. He's headed for the Box K to see Iry Todd, but when I tell him Iry's too sick to be seen he says he reckons he'll drive over to San Simeon an' see you at Jim Presbery's place. I'm some curious to know how come Henry Menefee to know where he's likely to find you and what he wants to see you about, so I tell him you're here, an' he turns around an' trails right up here behind me. He's outside now a-talking to Tommy Scaife." Jake paused, looked keenly at Gail and then at Purdy. "I reckon you don't have to see Henry Menefee if you don't want to," he suggested.

Fell a silence. Gail realized that Jake, in his subtle way, desired to give her a hint of impending danger, without, however, seeming to project himself into her affairs.

"Do you think he's called to serve papers, Jake?" Purdy queried.

Jake shrugged. "Times is pretty hard in the cattle business an' with them fellers it's always a case of safety first. They been foreclosin' on others in this county."

"Mr. Menefee has not come here for that purpose," Gail stated confidently. "He has agreed with Mr. Todd to renew the mortgage on the cattle and I dare say he is calling to secure my signature to a new note."

Jake and Purdy exchanged almost imperceptible glances. "Who told you all this, ma'am, may I ask?" the former interrogated.

"Mr. Todd, at the hospital yesterday afternoon."

"I reckon there must be some mistake, ma'am. Henry Menefee's office is over to Albuquerque an' he wouldn't come this far just to get you to sign a new note. He'd send the note by mail an' ask you to sign it an' mail it back to him."

"But Mr. Todd showed me the telegram," Gail persisted.

Jake subsided, but again he cast a swift, sidelong glance at Purdy's face. Evidently reassured by what he saw there, he stood up to go. "Well, I reckon you know your own business, ma'am," he decided. "There ain't no more to say, 'ceptin' I've come to the conclusion I don't want no attachment on your saddle stock

to protect my claim for wages. I've done forgot that notion, an' I'm here to say it wasn't no credit to me ever to think of it."

"Why, naturally you would release the attachment after Mr. Todd had paid you," Gail countered coolly.

"Iry ain't paid me nothin', Miss Ormsby."

"Why—why, he told me he had borrowed some money, on his personal credit, from a bank in Santa Fe; that he had given you the ranch payroll with instructions to pay off the hands."

"I ain't seen no payroll, ma'am, and I want you should know I'm declinin' to protect my claim for reasons best known to myself. Furthermore, Iry ain't been to Santa Fe lately. I heard him tell Pete Howe to collect from you. He told Pete he didn't have no money for him, that the ranch bank account was overdrew an' the ranch credit strained to the limit, so I reckon, ma'am, you must have misunderstood Iry."

"I did not misunderstand him at all." Gail's heart began to beat wildly. Jake shrugged and dropped the subject; after one more sidelong glance at Purdy, he bowed abruptly and left the room.

Instantly Gail turned to her host. "What has come over that man?" she demanded. "Yesterday and this morning he was as ferocious as a lion. Tonight he is as meek as a lamb. Really, he appears crushed and sad."

"He is," Purdy said. "Jake is all broken up."

"But why?"

"I could answer that question but I prefer not to. I would rather Jake answered it."

"Can it be possible Mr. Todd has deceived me about the renewal of the note to the cattle loan company and the payroll?"

"You will excuse me, I know, from discussing Ira Todd and the probabilities of human error in his peculiar make-up."

"Forgive me. I should have known better than to have asked you that question. What do you suppose Mr. Menefee desires to see me about?"

"I imagine he has called to talk business—to present an ultimatum or serve you with a copy of a complaint in a suit for foreclosure."

"But Mr. Todd told me——"

"I'm quite sure he did," Purdy interrupted good-naturedly. "The way to decide the matter, however, is to have Henry Menefee in and ask him. Henry doesn't lie. I'll invite him to stay all night. It might be an advantage to you to meet him socially. Will you pardon me while I go to bid Menefee welcome?"

He found Menefee seated in his automobile at the front of the house, with Jake Dort and Tommy Scaife standing beside the car talking with him. "Hello, there, Henry," he greeted the visitor cordially. "Howdy?"

"Howdy, Major."

"Better come in and have dinner, Henry," Purdy invited him cordially. "If you can make the grade, suppose you stay all night. It's a forty-mile drag to town over a rough road in the dark, and we can put you up in better quarters than you'll find in the hotel at Arguello."

Menefee was no stranger to the hospitality of the

Enchanted Hill, and required no urging to accept the invitation. He reached into the tonneau and tossed out his bag to his host.

"Run your car up to the garage, Henry," Purdy urged, "and come into the living-room via the patio. You know the way. Meanwhile, I'll brew you a cocktail."

"Confound your picture, Purdy!" Menefee declared heartily. "You're a hard man to quarrel with. I've been rehearsing the cussing I was going to give you when we met—and now I've plumb forgot the piece I was going to speak."

"Oh, cuss away, Henry. I've been anticipating a cussing and am primed to receive it good-naturedly. Don't permit a little question of hospitality to undermine your good resolution."

"That was a bit of sharp practice, setting your cattle adrift so I couldn't levy on the security for our loan to you," Menefee complained. "That forces us to do something we didn't want to do. We've got to carry you now till next fall, and we're so hard hit I'm wondering who's going to carry us! The Federal Reserve Bank isn't taking any more cattle loan paper, so the commercial banks will not discount any more of it for us; and I'm telling you, Purdy, the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation just can't help being nasty. Self-preservation is the first law of human nature, and my instructions from the head office are to grab everything I can lay my hands on."

"I suppose you mean you're going to levy on the Box K cattle?" Purdy suggested.

"Surest thing you know. A burned child dreads the

fire, Purdy, and I've got a little document with me that'll keep the Box K cattle where I can lay my hands on them. I understand from Dort here that the girl old Aleck Garnett left his ranch to is a guest here."

Purdy nodded.

"I hope you won't take it ill of me if I serve her, while we're both your guests, Purdy. I can't say I relish the idea myself, but I don't know how to avoid it."

"We all have to do distressing things occasionally, Henry, so I suppose I'll have to permit you to serve her. After all I have no interest in preventing the service. Miss Ormsby is our guest here more by accident than design. But I understood you wired Todd yesterday that your people would renew the note."

"I wired him nothing of the sort."

"I saw the telegram, Henry."

"Then it's a forgery. My instructions are to close her out."

"That's unfortunate—for the girl—— Well, park your car in the garage, Henry, and come into the house. Tommy, Jake and I have buried the hatchet. Tell Joaquin not to get fresh when you take Jake up to the mess hall for dinner; also give Jake back his gun."

Purdy returned to the house, carrying Menefee's bag, while the latter, with Tommy Scaife and Jake standing on the running-board of his car, rolled away toward the garage. Halfway there Tommy Scaife dropped off to convey the boss's message to the temperamental Joaquin, but Jake Dort continued on to the garage.

"Mr. Menefee," he announced, when the latter

alighted after running his car into the garage, "I dunno whether you noticed it or not, but I'm a deputy sheriff."

"I hadn't noticed it, Dort," Menefee replied, mildly surprised that Jake should mention the matter in such a childish manner.

"Take a free look, mister," Jake invited, and peeled back the lapel of his canvas coat.

Menefee looked. "Well, if that shield means anything it means you're a deputy sheriff, Dort," he admitted. "Have you taken the oath of office?"

"I have," Jake replied, "an' now I aim to exercise my authority. What do you mean by pesterin' around my lady boss, a-threatenin' to serve unwelcome legal documents on her? Don't you know you're plumb out of order a-pursuing of this helpless female into a private dwellin'? Don't you realize you're a-disturbin' of her peace?"

"Go to the devil," Menefee snapped at him briskly. "You're drunk or crazy or both."

"Mebbe so," Jake drawled, "but I'm a deputy sheriff an' as such I hereby arrest you on a charge of disturbin' the peace. You goin' to submit quietly to arrest or argy the question with me?"

"You three-ply idiot! You haven't a warrant for my arrest."

"I know it, but a deputy sheriff has the legal right to make an arrest on information an' belief that a crime is about to be committed. I believe you're about to commit the crime of disturbin' of my boss's peace o' mind, so I hereby arrest you. Set still while I frisk you for weepons."

Menefee made no objection while Jake's huge paws roved over him and brought to light an automatic pistol, so small Menefee carried it in his vest pocket.

"You got a permit to tote a gun?" the ambitious deputy sheriff demanded. Menefee shook his head. "Then I got you on a charge o' carrying concealed weepons. What you-all mean, anyhow, by totin' this little lady gun in your vest pocket? Ain't you lived long enough in New Mexico to carry a man's-size gun manfashion? What else you got on your person? . . . Hum-m-m! I'll jest hang on to this here bunch o' legal papers until I've had time to pe-ruse the same. Meanwhile, you jog along to the house an' partake of the Major's hospitality."

"Dort," said Menefee in even tones, "you're a scoundrel."

"Well, what do you expect from a feller that's been drug up through life by the hair of his head? On your way, old-timer. Mosey along."

Menefee, who was physically no match for Jake, departed cursing, while, by the light of the headlights, Jake perused the documents he had possessed himself of under the undoubted right of search vested in all duly appointed deputy sheriffs.

Leaving the garage, Jake waddled over to the mess hall, where Tommy Scaife vouched for him to Joaquin. From the pantry shelf, where it had reposed since Jake had declined to accept the return of it in lieu of his word of honor to behave himself, on the morning he had headed the mob, Tommy took Jake's old forty-five and silently handed it back to him. Jake buckled it on, declared he now felt more like a deputy sheriff

than ever and sat down to supper. Presently Pete Howe strolled in and tucked his long legs under the table opposite Jake.

"Pete," said Jake severely, "what you doin' here?"

"I'm just settin' around until Link Hallowell gits back from Los Angeles. When he does mebbe I land me a job on La Cuesta Encantada."

"Fine," Jake returned. "Meanwhile, you're not earnin' anything, although for the sake of your health you'd ought to be doin' something. You payin' Major Purdy anything for your keep?"

"Nary cent, Jake."

"Then you're a-livin' on charity. You're without visible means of support an' liable to become a charge on the community, which is why I hereby arrests you for vagrancy." And for the second time that night Jake flashed his imposing deputy sheriff's badge. "Havin' known you a long time, however, I'm a-willin' to save you from the disgrace of confinement in the Arguello *juzgado* provided you accept a job I'm layin' out for you. At least you can earn your board an' lodgin' an' if the cat jumps just right you got a chance to collect the wages of a top cow-hand. Right after you've et, saddle up an' head home for the Box K. Me, I'm goin' back in the ranch car as soon as I can wrap myself around some food. Come sunup tomorrow mornin' we'll be a-combin' the draws along the edge of the lower Rio Hondo for cow critters."

"Oh!" murmured Pete with his mouth full. "So Iry's changed his mind."

"No, sir, I've changed mine. Tommy, do you reckon you could induce your boss to send Joaquin, with the

chuck wagon, an' some regular grub, accompanied by three riders, to help us out? We got a job to do in a right smart of a hurry."

"They'll start tonight," Tommy assured them on the authority of one close to the throne.

Jake tossed over to Tommy Scaife the two documents he had filched from Henry Menefee. "Read 'em an' weep," he suggested, and leaning far across the table, he speared a slice of bread on his fork and brought it safely to his plate. Pete Howe, meanwhile, eyed the range boss solemnly but with mighty approval.

"I reckon you're right, Jake," he mumbled presently. "Iry certainly is one yaller pup."

"Bed springs ain't no crookeder, Pete."

A silence. "Reckon I'll take the job you offer, Jake."

"I reckon you'd better, you fiddle-headed hoss thief. I ain't offerin' jobs too freely these days. Scaife, what do you reckon I'd ought to do with them papers I took from Henry Menefee?"

"Burn 'em," Tommy suggested lightly.

"The ayes have it and it is so ordered." Jake rose, waddled to the range and shoved the papers into the fire-box.

CHAPTER XXI

HENRY MENEFEE was a cold-blooded business man. He had to be in order to maintain and retain his position as New Mexico manager for the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation. However, he never recommended calling a loan or levying on the security of it in normal times, unless convinced that the debtor needed prodding to make him move; but when his board of directors gave him his orders he was implacable. It was said of Henry Menefee that when forbidden by law to levy on a widow's last cow, he would wait patiently until the cow dropped her calf and levy on that; to a man of his temperament, therefore, it was but natural that he should have arrived in Lee Purdy's living-room, in a most unbeautiful temper, following his experience at the hands of the none too amiable Jake. He could barely restrain himself long enough to acknowledge his introduction to Gail before he burst forth with his tale of the outrage.

Purdy had, in the interim, shaken up some cocktails. "Tuck one under your belt, Henry," he soothed the loan agent. "Neither Miss Ormsby nor I, nor any of my employees, suggested this thing to Jake Dort," he continued. "Jake acted entirely on his own responsibility."

"What'd he do it for, Purdy?" Menefee growled.

"To protect Miss Ormsby, of course. He didn't

want her annoyed with a law-suit. It now becomes necessary for you to get another restraining order from the county-seat, I take it."

"Well, I'll get it and I'll serve it."

"I wouldn't bother if I were you, Henry. Miss Ormsby's cattle will all be adrift in the Reserve by the time you get around to doing that."

"They won't if Miss Ormsby orders that man Jake to leave them where they are."

"But Miss Ormsby will not do that, Henry. She's going to apply your own principle of self-preservation, the first law of human nature."

Menefee frowned. "Well, that means I can't stay for dinner, Purdy. I'll have a cocktail or two, and then be on my way to Arguello. I'll telephone to the judge of the superior court at the county-seat, who issued that restraining order, and he'll have his clerk telegraph me a duplicate. I'll be back on La Cuesta Encantada tomorrow noon and if anybody wants to make some bets that I won't get action then, why, I'm willing to accommodate him."

The master of the Enchanted Hill chuckled in great good humor and poured his disgruntled guest a drink.

"I'll have a duplicate restraining order for John Doe, Richard Roe, James Black and William Green," Menefee assured him. "Every man riding behind a Box K steer will be served with one—and the cattle will remain where they are."

"Perhaps."

"There's some three hundred head of Todd's cattle running with the Box K brand. Are you going to run them out on to the Reserve, also, Miss Ormsby?"

Gail cast a malicious and triumphant glance at her host. "You'll have to ask the Major that question, Mr. Menefee. He is my adviser and whatever he suggests I should do will, of course, be done."

"Well, I'll say this of your adviser, Miss Ormsby. He's fully capable of advising you. However, once I quit pitching and commence running I'm a pretty fast horse myself and most as intelligent as a mule."

He tossed off his drink, bade Gail and Purdy good night, picked up his bag where Purdy had set it on the living-room table, and departed via the patio exit. Fifteen minutes later he returned, angrier than before.

"My car will not start," he complained furiously to Purdy. "Somebody has removed the platinum points on the circuit breaker and I can't raise a spark to start the motor."

"Well, don't look at me as if I had done it, Henry. I do not know who did it and I did not order it done, but I'd like to have a gold medal struck to commemorate the event. Henry, if I knew who marooned you here, I'd pin a rose on him."

"Will you send me over to Arguello in your car, Purdy?" Menefee pleaded.

"Certainly not, Henry. I'll not raise a finger to hinder your perfectly just and legal operations, directly or indirectly, but neither will I raise the same finger to hinder Miss Ormsby's plans. I'm neutral."

"I wish you were too proud to fight. May I have the loan of a horse?"

"Over my dead body, Henry."

"Well, then," Menefee rasped, "I'll stay for dinner and after dinner I'll——"

"You're out of luck, Henry. The telephone line to Arguello is out of order, so it will be impossible for you to telephone for a car to come and get you. Try the telephone if you wish, however. It's on the desk in my office across the hall."

While Menefee sat in Purdy's office, hopefully twiddling the telephone receiver without eliciting a response, Gail and Purdy sat gazing humorously at each other.

"Jake has unsuspected depths of genius, Miss Ormsby," Purdy suggested presently. "In the polite patois of the great city, he has spilled the beans."

"I love men who spill beans."

"Jake has not only spilled them—he's scattered them, and as a result the Box K Ranch isn't big enough to accommodate Jake and Ira Todd on its broad acreage at one and the same time. One of them has to go and go *muy pronto*."

"Quite true, Major. Well, Ira Todd is going. I wish I had some money to give my men on account, but perhaps they will wait until I can raise some money on a mortgage. Fortunately the ranch is unencumbered."

Purdy's eyebrows went up. "Why, I thought you had decided to sell your ranch to Mr. Doak!"

. "I've changed my mind. If my fortunes are involved with yours and you are going to fight, I shall fight also. It wouldn't be sporty to quit under fire, and I've a queer sort of intuition about you. There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. I'm going to follow your lead. Will you be so good as to send for Jake and Pete?"

He nodded, entered the office, called the mess hall

on the inter-ranch telephone and instructed Tommy Scaife to request Jake and Pete to report at the house as soon as they had finished dinner.

"Jake says he wants all the help we can give him to get the Box K cattle out of the winter pasture," Tommy advised his chief.

"See that he gets it," Purdy ordered, and hung up. Ten minutes later Jake Dort and Pete Howe came into the room. Gail advanced to meet them.

"May I call you Jake?" she queried of the big range boss, and held out her hand.

"Those as likes me calls me Jake," he responded, and took the proffered hand very gingerly.

"And may I call you Pete?" Gail asked, turning to Jake's erstwhile successor in office.

"I never answer to no whistle," Mr. Howe admitted with a grin.

"Boys," the girl began bravely, "I haven't got any money for you and I do not know when I shall have it. In fact I do not know that I shall ever be in a position to pay you your wages."

"I ain't heard nobody dunnin' you, ma'am," Pete Howe reminded her gently.

"An' they'd better not," Jake reminded him. "Now that we've killed that subject o' conversation, boss, we'll pass on to somethin' else. Was there somethin' else you wanted to talk to Pete an' me about?"

"I did. Jake, you're the general manager of the Box K Ranch and your first duty will be to present this written order of dismissal from my employ to Mr. Ira Todd." And Gail handed him an envelope. "Pete, you are the Box K foreman."

Both gentlemen of the range bowed. "We accept the nomination," said Jake.

"With many thanks," Pete Howe supplemented.

"That is all I wanted to see you about, Jake."

The new general manager of the Box K turned to his foreman. "Let's git goin', Pete," he said, and with a cheery good night which even included Henry Menefee, he led the way out. Conchita, entering, announced for the second time that dinner was served, whereupon Menefee, putting the best face possible upon the situation, begged five minutes in which to go to his room and make himself pretty. Purdy excused him.

Scarcely had Menefee left the room when Lee Purdy went into his office, and returned bearing nothing more nor less than Gail's lost purse.

"I found this lying in the path as I came down from the hangar, last night," he informed her casually. "I had it in my pocket when you flew at me so vigorously a little later, and for reasons best known to myself I concluded to let you suffer awhile. You deserved it, you know, but now that we are no longer enemies, but allies, it seems I ought to restore your property."

Gail did not know whether to laugh or to cry, to be grateful or furiously angry. She compromised by remaining silent.

"Of course, I could have returned your purse in time to permit you to give Jake and Pete something on account of their back wages," he went on, "but I had a curiosity about those two. I wanted to be certain they are quite loyal to you. I think now that they are. I think you should trust them."

"I do."

"You're a smart woman and a dead game sport. Please excuse me while I see if Hallie is able to join us at dinner."

It developed, however, that Hallie was not, so dinner was disposed of rather constrainedly by Purdy, Gail and Menefee. At the conclusion of the meal Menefee expressed his appreciation of his host's hospitality, said good night, and departed from La Cuesta Encantada on foot, bound for San Simeon. The Forest Reserve headquarters were some eighteen miles distant, and the resolute Menefee had decided to walk the distance before daylight. Here he could borrow or rent an automobile and be in Arguello in time to telephone to the county-seat about the hour the county judge should reach his chambers.

CHAPTER XXII

THE morning following Henry Menefee's first visit to La Cuesta Encantada, Lee Purdy, accompanied by Tommy Scaife, visited the room in the bunkhouse where Tommy had handcuffed Steve MacDougald's murderer and placed him under guard of Curly McMahon. The fellow lay on the bed, glaring at them, and when addressed by Purdy in English shrugged and replied in Spanish that he did not speak English. Purdy thereupon spoke to him in Spanish and was promptly informed that his (Purdy's) Spanish was so poor nobody could possibly understand it!

"He won't talk for a day or two yet," Tommy Scaife advised. "He's wearin' his poker face an' pretendin' ignorance this mornin'. We'll let him rest an' think it over."

"I cannot adjust my time to suit his convenience, Tommy," Purdy replied ironically. "There are too many people delegated to kill me, and I must know things. I'll make our little friend talk."

"How? With a hot iron?"

"Something better than that. Tommy, the tried old Filipino water cure will make an innocent man plead guilty. Get me that big watering-pot out of the garden and bring it to me full of water."

Tommy obeyed. "Now spread-eagle this *hombre* out on the porch with his head hanging over the top step,"

Purdy ordered. "Curly, you sit on his legs. Tommy, draw his manacled hands up over his head and hold them in back of him . . . there, that's the idea. Now hold him steady."

Into the murderer's upturned face Purdy poured water from the watering-pot. It ran gently into his eyes, into his mouth and his nostrils; so he closed his eyes and mouth and for a few seconds tried, by expelling his breath through his nostrils, to keep the water out of them. Naturally he failed when his lungs were emptied, and instantly his mouth flew open. In desperation he turned his head as far as he could to one side, but not far enough to escape the stream that cascaded steadily into his face. Gurgling and coughing, he flung his head over to the other side, but still the water followed him; his body twisted and contorted in the grip of his captors and he gurgled far down in his throat.

When Purdy tilted the nozzle of the watering-pot and gave his victim a moment's surcease, the man gurgled, gasped and moaned an appeal to the Deity. He was half drowned, his lungs already beginning to fill up with water. At a sign from Purdy, Curly released the man's legs and Tommy Scaife rolled him on his face, stood over him, picked him up by the middle and emptied him as one would a barrel. When the water ceased to drip out of the man's nose and mouth, Purdy hurled him over on his back and stood over him again with the watering-pot poised.

"Now, then, old son," he murmured soothingly, "do you speak English?"

"*Muy poco*," the man sobbed. "A veery leetle."

"Do you understand my Spanish?" asked Purdy.

"*Si, señor.*"

"You killed that forest ranger, Steve MacDougald."

"*Santa María Purísima!* No!"

Purdy nodded and Curly flung himself on the man's legs, and with Tommy holding down his handcuffed arms he was spread-eagled again. When Purdy raised the watering-pot, the murderer screamed in fear and agony. In hysterical Spanish and English he besought mercy and began babbling hysterical answers to Lee Purdy's questions. The inquisition was in Spanish.

"Who hired you?"

"Señor Todd."

"Where?"

"In El Paso."

"How much did he pay you?"

"Five hundred dollars gold. Two hundred and fifty he paid at the time of the engagement and two hundred and fifty more he agreed to pay me when I had killed you."

"Why did you kill the forest ranger?"

"He looked up the hillside and saw me behind the bush. I knew he would come to arrest me—I fired at once. I am sorry I killed him, but I had to. I tell you he saw me."

"That sounds reasonable. Did you start that fire?"

"Yes, but it was all smoke."

"Why?"

"So you would drop down from the skies and your wings would break. I was to watch where you fell, and if your motor made a fire I was to put the fire out. If you still lived after falling I was to kill you."

"Who arranged all this?" Purdy demanded.

"Señor Todd."

"After you killed the forest ranger you came over here to kill me. Did Todd instruct you to do that?"

"I was told that if you did not fall, to leave the Cuyamaca at once, otherwise the forest rangers would trail me and arrest me. And I was not to return, because of this danger, but to try some other way to kill Señor Purdy."

"Have you any friends who also have been engaged to kill me?"

"No, señor. I work alone. If others know, perhaps some day when we quarrel they may do me an injury by telling the sheriff."

Purdy and Tommy exchanged glances. "That Todd is a slick one," Tommy murmured admiringly. "Never lets his right hand know what his left hand does. I'll bet Shannon never heard of this article here, and the man Joaquin killed probably didn't know there were other killers on the same job."

"If five hundred dollars per man is what he's paying, Todd has a murder fund of from three to five thousand dollars, Tommy. In all his life Ira Todd has never had that much money of his own at one time, and even if he had it he couldn't afford to spend it so recklessly. Somebody with a bank account—some rich man—is behind him in this devilish enterprise. The thing to do is to ascertain the identity of the man behind."

"That's not a hard job, Lee. Let's get Ira Todd and give him the water cure, same as we've done to this *hombre*."

"Well, of course, we've got to get hold of Todd and

try him for murder, for conspiracy to commit murder, or as an accessory before and after the fact. We'll convict him on this man's testimony and Bud Shannon's, if Shannon will talk—and I think he will. Shannon will not be in jeopardy, because I shall never testify against him and he cannot be made to testify against himself. Our unhappy friend here—by the way"—turning to the prisoner—"what's your name?"

"Diego Herrera, señor."

"Well, Diego will turn state's evidence to save his neck and Todd will be landed high and dry—on a gibbet, I hope. But we cannot be in too great a hurry to place Todd in custody. When we land him we will want to land his co-conspirator with him."

Tommy got out his pocket-knife and began to pare a calloused spot on his hard, freckled hand. "Ira Todd's been fired from the Box K, the Box K cattle aren't going to be foreclosed on this year, and as far as that property is concerned, Todd's plans have slipped a cog, it seems to me," he declared presently.

"And I'm still living, Tommy, and Todd knows that one of his jackals walked into our hands and was killed. To complicate matters further, Todd doesn't know whether that killer talked before he died or died with his mouth shut, and the uncertainty is very demoralizing. My guess is that in his excitement he will seek an immediate conference with the Man Higher Up."

Tommy smiled a slow, prescient smile. "Go on, Lee, go on. You're gittin' good," he urged. "What do we do next?"

"Curly," Purdy ordered, "keep an eye on Diego Herrera for the present. Tommy, you and I will oil and

clean our light artillery and go over to the Box K Ranch to see if Todd is still there."

Within the hour they had landed far down in the alfalfa field below the Box K ranch-house. Leaving the ship, they circled in opposite directions and closed in on the house from the north and the south, respectively. Both were armed with rifles, for they confidently anticipated being fired upon by Todd, should he observe them approaching. But the ranch was deserted. Tommy and Lee searched the scattered buildings, and in the main house there was ample evidence that Todd had packed his scant effects and departed.

"The ranch automobile ain't in evidence," Tommy announced. "We know Jake's out on a horse with the round-up, so I reckon he must have given Todd the use of the car to get into Arguello with."

"Probably. Well, the bird has flown and he didn't wait long after receiving his dismissal. He'll head for Arguello and board the two-thirteen overland train for the west this afternoon, or else he'll board the four-forty-six eastbound."

"That sounds reasonable, Lee. Looks like we're due to hop off for Arguello right now."

"We are. Let's drift."

"What do you aim to do with Diego Herrera, Lee? Hadn't we better take him to Arguello and turn him over to the local authorities?"

"Not for a day or two, Tommy. The minute we surrender him the news of his capture will become public property, and when Todd hears it he may act differently and spoil all my plans."

Tommy nodded assent to this reasoning and climbed behind the wheel while Purdy spun the propeller, and then climbed into the ship with the pilot. Half an hour later they had parked the plane on the outskirts of Arguello. In the fuselage they left their helmets and their rifles, wrapped up in their leather coats; bareheaded, in their shirt-sleeves, and each with a pair of forty-five-caliber revolvers showing in open holsters at his hip, they calmly walked up Main Street, Purdy leading and Tommy Scaife following his chief at a distance of about thirty feet.

The chair-warmers on the veranda of the hotel watched them pass and then stood up to gaze after them; town loafers on the wooden sidewalk in front of the pool hall glanced at each other understandingly. All knew that a tragedy impended should Lee Purdy meet with the man he sought—and it was common knowledge now that the man he sought was Ira Todd.

Glancing alertly to left and right, Lee Purdy proceeded until, parked at the curb in front of the public telephone exchange, he recognized the weather-beaten automobile belonging to the Box K Ranch. Instantly he turned toward it, followed by Tommy, whose freckled hands now rested lightly on the butts of his guns.

"I reckon he's in the telephone office," Tommy called; and Purdy, nodding, strode into the building.

At the counter, leaning over it with his aching head in his hands and with his back to the door, stood Todd. Purdy sidled up alongside his man and rudely prodded him with his left elbow.

"Well, Todd, I hear you've been fired from the Box K," he greeted his enemy.

Todd turned dizzily, recognized Purdy and swiftly dropped his hand to his hip; as swiftly Lee Purdy struck him with his fist and knocked him sprawling on his back before he could draw the weapon.

"You have a few hours of life left you, Todd," his assailant assured him. "I wouldn't do such a messy job, in the presence of these young ladies anyhow." His gun covered the prostrate man. "Which train were you planning to board—the eastbound or the westbound?"

"Neither. You don't suppose I was running from you, do you?"

"Yes, of course. Well, the jig's up, Todd. This is settlement day and you've got to stay in Arguello and settle."

Todd picked himself up off the floor and fixed a wandering eye upon the girl seated at the switchboard. "Cancel that call for me, young lady," he mumbled and lurched toward the door. Tommy Scaife watched Todd climb into the car, back away, and drive up Main Street to a garage into which he disappeared. He emerged presently, on foot, carrying two suitcases, and made his somewhat uncertain way down the street to the hotel. Tommy followed, alert for reinforcements, and stood at Todd's elbows while the latter rented a room and retired to it, whereupon the little red demon returned to the telephone office.

"Where was that feller Todd fixin' to talk to, Lee?"

"I heard the operator tell the Albuquerque operator to cancel a call for Doak, in Los Angeles."

"Birds of a feather will flock together, won't they? What's the next move, Lee?"

"Where's Todd?" Purdy asked in a low voice.

"He's hired a room and holed up in the hotel. Lee, we've got him plumb rattled. He's afraid to appear on the street—added to which I don't suppose he's feelin' well enough to be out much."

"Well, we've blocked him from talkin' to Doak over the long-distance telephone. We've got him holed up in the hotel, afraid to show his nose on the street again, because he thinks I'll kill him if he does, and——"

"He may talk to Doak from the hotel room."

"He can't. There are no room telephones, and if you sit in the lobby, he can't talk from the main office."

"Then he'll most likely write a telegram and send it out to be filed."

"Righto, Thomas. And I do hope the telegram will not be in code. I can read Morse, Tommy. Guess I'll go over to the telegraph office and talk to the operator; if he sends a message for Todd, I'll read it as he sends it. Besides, I want to wire Link Hallowell to call me on the telephone."

Accordingly Tommy Scaife repaired to the hotel and sat in the lobby. An hour later, Lee Purdy drifted in and sat down beside him. "Well, he wired Doak Tommy," Purdy confided. "Told him things were breaking badly, that he was unable to go to Los Angeles for a conference and unable to telephone him; he urged Doak to come to Arguello immediately for a conference at the hotel."

Tommy's buttermilk eyes beamed with pleasurable anticipation. "That means they both come to La Cuesta Encantada to take the cure."

"I hope so. Remain on guard here, Tommy, while I

run over to the hospital to see how Bud Shannon fares. If he is going to talk, I want him to talk now."

The forty-eight hours following the blood transfusion had done much for Bud Shannon. Pneumonia had not developed and the patient had rallied wonderfully, thanks to a rugged constitution and a very great yearning to live, now that he was satisfied he was the possessor of something which he could trade to Lee Purdy for his life and liberty. Mr. Shannon had, for some hours before Purdy appeared at his bedside, been doing some hard, clear thinking and had outlined his defense quite thoroughly.

"Well, Bud, you old cut-up, how are you today?" Purdy demanded in his friendliest tones.

"Doin' nicely, thank you. Reckon I won't shove up any of the late spring grass this year, Mr. Purdy."

"You will if I decide you ought to," the latter reminded him crisply.

"I'm not afraid you'll decide to do anything like that, Mr. Purdy."

"You're pretty smart, aren't you, Shannon? Well, I dare say we understand each other and can do some fast trading. Who hired you to kill me?"

"Jasper Doak, of Doak, Erlin & Doak, Citizens' National Bank Building, Los Angeles, California, U. S. A.," Shannon wheezed brazenly. "The price was five hundred, all in advance."

"Will you swear to that in court?"

Bud Shannon smiled a swordfish smile. "Reckon I'll have to, won't I?"

"Not necessarily, but it would be doing me a great favor, Shannon."

"What do I get out of it?" Bud Shannon inquired.

"A grand jury indictment for conspiracy to commit murder. The district attorney will be bound to bring your case before the grand jury, in view of the testimony, so damaging to yourself, which you will give at Doak's trial. But they cannot convict you on that testimony, Shannon. A conviction will have to be based on the testimony given in your own trial—not Doak's—and you will not have to testify against yourself unless you desire to! If you're put on the stand you can decline to answer questions upon the ground that your answers might tend to incriminate or degrade you. The judge will sustain your contention."

"That's fine, as far as it goes—but it goes further. What'll happen to me when they put *you* on the stand?"

"Your word's as good as mine in this country."

"Not after I testify at Doak's trial that he hired me to kill you."

"You need not testify that you tried to earn your fee."

"No, but everybody'll know I did try, which was how I come to land in this hospital with a hole through me."

"People can think all they want but they cannot prove anything."

"They can prove it by your testimony, an' I got you figgered as a man that won't lie under oath to save nobody."

"Certainly I wouldn't. But I will never testify that you tried to kill me because *I was asleep when you tried! I did not see you shoot at me, so I cannot identify you as my assailant.* All I have to connect you with the job is suspicion and hearsay evidence—sup-

plied by you. *I shot you on the mere suspicion that you had tried to kill me.* I'm morally certain I made no mistake, and you're positive I didn't, but I would refuse to swear in court that you *are* the man who shot at me; you do not have to admit it and if you are convicted in the superior court I'll hire lawyers to reverse the conviction in the Supreme Court."

"I'll play the game with you, Mr. Purdy."

"Thanks. As soon as you can stand it, I'm going to put you on a stretcher, carry you over to my airplane and give you a nice, soft, joltless ride out to my ranch. If Todd or Doak learn that you are here and who put you here, your life may not be worth very much. Dead men tell no tales."

Shannon grimaced and extended a bloodless hand. "I'll play you across the board, up and down and sideways, Mr. Purdy. You've been mighty good to me an' I'm sure beholden to you."

From the hospital Purdy drifted back to the telegraph station, which, as is so generally the case in small cow towns on a railroad, was located in the railroad ticket office. At the news-stand he bought a couple of magazines and sat down in the waiting-room, ostensibly to read but in reality to listen in on the chattering of the telegraph instrument every time he heard Arguello called. At five o'clock he received the reward of his patience when he heard the station-master take a message for Ira Todd. It was dated at Los Angeles and ran:

"Absolutely impossible to come to Arguello. You must come here. DOAK."

The clattering telegraph instrument was silent for a minute, then Purdy heard Arguello called once more. This time it was a telegram to Purdy from Link Hallowell, informing the former that he would wait in the Union Stockyards Hotel until he heard from him.

With the telegram in his pocket Purdy strolled back to the hotel and beckoned Tommy Scaife to join him on the veranda. "Let's scout around town, Tommy," he suggested, "and see if we can smoke out those strangers you had the brush with. If we find them we'll make them explain themselves. Anyhow, I want a good look at them so I'll know them as far as I can see them later."

The pair prowled around the town, but failed to discover a stranger to them in it, so they returned to the telephone exchange and Purdy talked for fifteen minutes with Link Hallowell in Los Angeles. "Now, then, Thomas," he announced, as he emerged from the telephone booth, "our affair is on the lap of the gods. Link Hallowell knows everything that has happened since he left with those steers, and I've told him to stay in Los Angeles and watch Doak, Erlin & Doak's office and keep an eye out for the possible arrival of Todd."

"Are we going home now?"

"Yes, we might as well. That scoundrel will head for Los Angeles if we do. I have an intuition that nothing will happen for several days, so I might as well go down on the Rio Hondo tomorrow and help on the Box K round-up. My horses and bedding roll went down last night."

"I wish you would, Lee," Tommy confessed. "Every minute you're prowlin' around the Hill I'm nervous.

There's a lot of cover and a lot of acreage to watch, and I'm always afraid some varmint will sneak inside our guard an' get close enough to the house to bump you off with a lucky rifle shot. When the moon comes up tonight I'll fly over with you."

They reached home just before dinner to find everything at La Cuesta Encantada as they had left it that morning. Hallie had conquered her grief over Steve's death, and was out with Gail and Steve's dog, Whuskey, for a stroll as her brother flew in. At dinner she informed him of her intention to attend the ranger's funeral.

"I'm afraid that will be impossible, Hallie," he replied. "I'm going down on the Rio Hondo tonight to help with Miss Ormsby's cattle until we get them up into the Reserve; Tommy has to be on the job here to keep Menefee off the Hill, and I have heaps of things for Curly McMahon to do, and I do not want you to drive down alone to San Simeon or Arguello or wherever the funeral is to be."

"I'll go with her," Gail volunteered. "I drive a car rather well and I'm neither weak nor crippled."

"Oh, good!" Hallie cried. "And Gail will sing at Steve's funeral. You will, Gail, to please me?"

"Of course I'll sing."

"Thank you, dear. Lee, I'll want a great many flowers."

"Very well. I suppose you'll feel badly if you do not see old Steve off on his last journey."

Hallie sighed. She knew her brother was worried and harassed about something, but she knew, too, that until he elected to confide in her it would please him to

reflect that she did not suspect he had anything to confide. Nevertheless she wept in his arms for a few minutes when, upon retiring, he kissed her good-by. When she had gone to her room, Purdy faced Gail.

"Well, the committee reports progress, Miss Ormsby," he announced. "Ira Todd has left your ranch and is holed up in the hotel at Arguello. He is worried and has wired Jasper Doak, of Doak, Erlin & Doak, Citizens' National Bank Building, Los Angeles, that matters are going badly, and for Doak to come to Arguello for a conference. Doak has replied that this is impossible and has asked Todd to come to Los Angeles. And Link Hallowell is watching the Los Angeles end of the mystery."

Gail's face paled. "Jasper Doak!" she exclaimed incredulously. "Why, what business can he have with Jasper Doak?"

Purdy grinned. "Shady business, no doubt."

"But Jasper Doak is not a shady man. He's a reputable lawyer and an old friend of my father's. He settled father's estate, and until he came to this country to look at the ranch my Uncle Aleck left me I do not think he had met Ira Todd."

"Was that the same Doak who offered to buy the Box K Ranch at the appraised value of that item in your uncle's estate?"

"Yes."

"Then they do want your ranch. Do you know the amount of the appraisal?"

"Yes. Three dollars an acre."

"It's worth ten, even in these hard times. No wonder they wanted to buy it. And if they could ruin you,

without your realizing it, that would be one more reason why you would be eager to accept that ridiculous price. Well, you can't be ruined until next fall, once we get those mortgaged cattle up into the Reserve. . . . Oh, Lord, what a puzzle! What *are* those two after? . . . I'll never forgive myself if I permit them to kill me before I find out."

"What is Link Hallowell going to do in Los Angeles?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I told him the entire story, and left to him the task of making his own balls and firing them. One can trust Link to act with discretion, and whatever he does will be done well."

"Now is the time for all good men and true to come to the aid of the party," Gail quoted.

"Please God they do not come too late," he replied with deep earnestness, and fell to discussing other things. At midnight he looked out, marked that the moon was up, and bade the girl good night. She gave him her hand and held his for an appreciable period.

"I do appreciate your friendship tremendously, Major Purdy," she assured him. "In the midst of your own great worries you find time to take on mine. It's fine of you."

"I'm glad you have discovered something commendable in my character," he answered with a wistful smile. "Good night—and take good care of Hallie for me while I'm gone, please."

He bent over, impulsively, and kissed her hand. "So sorry we got off to such a bad start," he murmured, "but that's an ancient fault of mine. However, it's the finish that really counts, isn't it?"

"I want to finish well, Major."

"Out in front, going strong, riding under wraps and enjoying the mud, eh? Good-by. God bless you and keep you."

He was gone, leaving the girl standing in the door, gazing after him as he strode through the patio. At the gate he turned and looked back; quite without volition on her part she kissed the tips of her fingers to him, and with an answering salute in kind he was gone. Five minutes later she heard the airplane roaring off the Enchanted Hill.

"Such a cool, calculating, soulless, soulful, wonderful, wild devil of a man!" she reflected. "And I don't care if he's a greater thief and a more relentless killer than he admits being. I like him. I fear I'm going to like him too much for my peace of mind." She gazed, starry-eyed, at the back of the little hand he had kissed so benignantly and respectfully and, returning to the deserted living-room, sat down before the embers of the dying log fire and wept at the futility of life in general and the tragedy of Lee Purdy's wasted life in particular.

CHAPTER XXIII

LONG after Link Hallowell had hung up the telephone he sat on the edge of his bed, in the Stockyards Hotel, pondering the things Purdy had told him. Point by point he reviewed, in orderly sequence, each dramatic event which had occurred since he had parted with Lee Purdy that day at San Onofre to come to Los Angeles with the shipment of steers.

For two days he had led a butterfly existence. He had been to two picture shows a day and had seen three good legitimate plays; he had eaten fried oysters three times and had done some shopping; and he had been on the point of going back to New Mexico when Lee Purdy's telegram arrived, instructing him to wire a definite engagement to talk with the latter by telephone.

They had talked and now there was, in Mr. Hallowell's expressive language, "all hell to pay and no pitch hot." Wherefore, Link Hallowell continued to sit on the bed and ponder until he had arrived at a conclusion, whereupon his mental pitch-pot boiled over.

"I ought to be back at La Cuesta Encantada," he decided. "I'm needed there. One thing is certain, however, and that is that the day I can see Ira Todd over the sights of a forty-five, that day Ira Todd or Link Hallowell departs this life. But I can't bust Todd in Los Angeles. It would be a sign of bad luck for me to

kill him off our own reservation, because the judge and the jury would never understand; they'd hang me as an example to others, and if Todd comes here, he and Doak will cook up some new deviltry, and Todd will be the chief devil. Doak's a lawyer and too smart to commit himself, so Todd will continue to pull Doak's chestnuts out of the fire. I've got to get Doak into New Mexico. Then we'll arrest him, confront him with that killer, Shannon, and see what happens . . .

"Yes, by Jupiter, Doak *must* be induced to start for Arguello immediately, otherwise we'll have a hard, expensive job extraditing him. He cannot be extradited except on a grand jury indictment and a grand jury indictment cannot be returned in the absence of the defendant. Doak, being a lawyer, knows this so all he has to do is to play safe, stay out of New Mexico and send another man to kill Shannon, the only witness against him. Yes, Mr. Hallowell, you may take the head of the class. A good lawyer was spoiled when you put in three years of your young life as a detective for the Cattlemen's Association of Arizona. You learned so blamed many half-baked legal points as a detective, you've never learned to think straight since!"

He reasoned further: "Todd got Doak's telegram about five o'clock, so he figures Doak will have left his office before a reply can reach him. So what Todd will do is this: He'll send Doak a long night letter. Doak will receive it early tomorrow morning, and if Todd's argument is strong enough, Doak may leave for Arguello on the California Limited today at eleven-thirty A. M. On the other hand he may not. I ought to call and sell Doak the idea that he is to drop everything

and proceed immediately to Arguello for that conference with Todd, even if Todd should wire him that he is coming to Los Angeles."

There being nothing more that he could do or think of that night, Mr. Hallowell journeyed from the Stockyards Hotel up into the heart of Los Angeles and attended a six-reel western photoplay in which an old friend of his, who had once been a real cowboy, was being starred. After the show he ate fried oysters for the fourth time and returned to his hotel.

At eight o'clock next morning he tried the office door of Doak, Erlin & Doak, but found it locked. At a quarter after eight a young woman appeared and opened the office, and a minute later came a boy with a telegram. Hallowell followed the boy in and asked for Mr. Jasper Doak, only to be informed by the girl that Mr. Doak would not arrive at the office until nine o'clock.

"I'll wait for him," Hallowell informed the girl, who thereupon indicated a chair he might occupy if he so desired, and handed him that morning's newspaper.

Promptly at nine o'clock Jasper Doak bustled in. He was a lean, sallow, somewhat undersized man on the sunny side of fifty. His eyes were a brilliant brown and, in certain lights, almost red; they were perfectly round and peeped from cavernous sockets—the eyes of a fighter, a zealot in any cause, whether for good or for evil. Slightly myopic, peering from each side of a long, vulpine nose, those eyes were, nevertheless, the windows of an alert, highly intelligent mind. Above a somewhat low, broad brow, iron-gray hair, short and thick as a bootbrush, stood straight up in a belligerent

pompadour, and accentuated the length of that mean, sallow face.

His glance transfixed Link Hallowell with an immediate inquiry. Without looking at his secretary he demanded bruskly:

"Any telegrams?"

The girl handed him the one the boy had just brought. "This gentleman is waiting to see you, Mr. Doak," she informed him.

Doak grunted slightly deep in his throat, and looked Hallowell over fiercely from boots to eyebrows. His glance was deliberate, appraising, unfriendly.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you recognized me the next time you see me," Link Hallowell observed calmly. "You look at me like I might be some sort of a freak."

"Who are you?"

"My name wouldn't mean anything to you, Mr. Doak. I had a talk over the long-distance telephone to Arguello, New Mexico, last night with a fellow down there and I thought maybe you'd be interested to hear what he had to say."

"Step into my private office," Doak invited him in an altered voice.

Once inside the private office, Doak closed the door, after first warning his secretary that he was not to be disturbed on any pretext. He stood in the middle of the floor, watching Link suspiciously and twirling the unopened telegram.

"I'm in no great hurry, Mr. Doak," his visitor informed him. "Read that telegram. It might be important. My business can wait."

Doak hastily opened and read the telegram three

times before turning his attention once more to Hallowell.

"I reckon that telegram's from Ira Todd," the latter ventured. "Seems like Ira never can trust anybody to do things right. Or else maybe he had another thought afterward."

"You come from Todd?" Doak challenged, and added instantly, "How do I know who you are? Have you a letter from him?"

"Gents in my profession don't carry letters, Mr. Doak. Cut out the sparring and get down to business. You sent a chap by the name of Bud Shannon to kill Lee Purdy. Well, he didn't do it. Purdy got Shannon instead. How's that for bad news?"

His attack was so direct, so forcible, that Doak's guard was lowered instantly. He paled. "Did Purdy kill Shannon?" he asked eagerly.

"No, but he put a hole through Bud's right lung. Then what d'ye suppose Purdy did?"

"What did he do? I'm not here to guess. Tell me and do not waste words."

"He took Shannon to the hospital at Arguello and Shannon's going to get well. Purdy hasn't told a soul how come Shannon to get shot, but Ira Todd heard about it and called on Shannon, who must have give him the particulars. So Todd calls on me to take up the job where Bud left off and referred me to you for the particulars. Mister, when I shoot at a man I hit him and I hit him in the spot I aim to hit him in. My price is seven hundred and fifty dollars to remove Lee Purdy and if you want the job done, say so. If not, there's no harm done and besides, I've got another

professional engagement for the same amount of money and not half the risk. I hope to tell you that man Purdy is dangerous."

"I know it, I know it," Doak growled, still completely off his guard.

"My price includes waftin' Bud Shannon over the river, too," the glib Hallowell went on. "You can't risk that bungler alive, nohow. Ira tells me he's that grateful to Purdy for failin' to kill him when he had the law on his side that he's liable to tell Purdy who hired him." Link Hallowell smiled cruelly into Doak's twitching face. "That would be inconvenient for you, Mr. Doak," he reminded the lawyer.

Doak nodded. Hallowell continued, "Ira and Purdy had a run-in the other morning in a restaurant run by a Chinaman, friend of Purdy's. Todd did his best to provoke gun-play, but Purdy played safe; then this Chink up an' swats Todd with a slice-bar and most ruins him. Todd isn't in fit physical condition to hold up his end of this deal as a result; he can't get around to see anybody, nobody knows you in the matter, and he wants I should impress upon you that if this job is to be put over, you've got to come to Arguello and help.

"Purdy's gunmen have Todd cornered in the hotel; the minute he shows on the street the shooting'll start. Purdy's ranch cook killed the man sent up to La Cuesta Encantada to jim up Purdy's airplanes and Purdy's man, Scaife, carried the body in the airplane over to the Box K Ranch and dropped it in on Ira without comment, while the man sent up to the Cuyamaca to start a smoke fire in the moss and bring Purdy down in a

crash missed out on his mission. A forest ranger spotted him and the damned crazy Mexican killed the ranger, and had to get out of the country two jumps ahead of the sheriff. Everything's gone wrong and Ira's got to get away for a while and he's got to get away in a hurry."

"Then Purdy and his people suspect Todd?"

"I hope to tell you they do. But Todd is the only one they do suspect and that's the point I'm stressing. Ira can't talk to you over the telephone and he can't wire you except in a guarded way. I tell you it's necessary to see him in person, and now is the time to see him. Hallowell is out of the state, Purdy is out helping Dort, the old Box K foreman, run Miss Ormsby's mortgaged cattle up into the Reserve before Menefee can foreclose on them, and Purdy's other gunman, Scaife, is watching things at La Cuesta Encantada. But Purdy's got two killers watching for Todd and Todd dare not leave the hotel. You know, of course, that the Ormsby girl has fired Todd?"

"It would never do for me to go there and communicate with him," Doak protested. "That would be poor strategy, indeed."

"Of course it would. But there'll be four of us to take care of Purdy's men before you show up in Arguello. We'll make them hard to catch. Then Todd'll leave the hotel and run down to San Onofre in his car to meet you and talk things over. I've got two tickets and a drawing-room on the California Limited. We can leave at eleven-thirty today. You drop off at San Onofre while I go on to Arguello to set Ira free."

"But Todd wires me he's coming here."

"He's crazy. I knew he'd get a brand-new set of ideas after talking to me. Wire him to stick where he is until your messenger reaches him. Tell him you're starting today."

Doak reread the telegram. He pondered.

"Todd thinks it's safe to leave Arguello because Purdy and Scaife have gone back to the ranch," Hallowell urged. "The fool doesn't know that man Purdy. I do. I *know* he has two killers out after Todd and has had them for a week."

"How do you know?"

Hallowell laughed. "He tried to hire me for the job, but he wouldn't pay enough. Besides, Todd's too popular in that country, and any time I remove a popular citizen I want a thousand dollars for the job. By the way, am I hired?"

"You certainly are."

"Then hand over my fee. I work for cash only. No deferred payments and no checks."

"I'll meet you at the train at eleven-fifteen," Doak replied crisply. "I'll hand you the money aboard the train."

"Sold! And wire Todd immediately to stay where he is until you get there."

Doak nodded and Link Hallowell departed without further ado. At eleven-fifteen o'clock Jasper Doak met him at the Santa Fé station, and fifteen minutes later the California Limited was rolling eastward, bearing Jasper Doak and Link Hallowell to a show-down in the lonely wastes of San Onofre.

CHAPTER XXIV

AT dawn the same morning Link Hallowell interviewed Jasper Doak in Los Angeles, Tommy Scaife hopped off the Enchanted Hill with Lee Purdy and bore the latter down into the valley of the Lower Rio Hondo. The smoke from Joaquin's camp-fire, rising straight into the still air for hundreds of feet, guided them to the round-up; they landed just as Jake Dort and his riders, having breakfasted, were departing for the day's work. Purdy breakfasted also, saddled his horse and rode forth, while Tommy winged his way back to La Cuesta Encantada, there to keep an eye on things and assist Curly McMahon in the care of Steve MacDougald's murderer.

After luncheon, acting under orders from Purdy, the little man flew in to Arguello, walked brazenly up the middle of Main Street and entered the hotel, where he ascertained that Ira Todd was still in his room.

"You might tell him to stay there," Tommy informed the proprietor, "unless he's willin' to argy with me in the smoke his right to come an' go as he blamed pleases."

"All right, I'll tell him," the hotel-keeper replied, and reaching under his counter, he exhibited for Tommy's inspection a sawed-off, double-barrelled shotgun. "An' now I'll tell you somethin'," he continued. "If you start anythin', Scaife, see that you don't start

it in my place o' business. I've had this entire lobby done over less'n six weeks ago an' the first feller that puts a bullet-hole in it has got to dodge twenty-two buckshot to git out alive."

Tommy laughed good-naturedly and departed for the post-office and telegraph station. At the latter place he found awaiting him a telegram, filed that day from Pasadena, and reading as follows:

"Meet California Limited San Onofre tomorrow afternoon without fail, pick up passenger leaving train there and take him out to ranch Stop He will object to trip by plane as I have kept that a secret, but you can argue him into it, I know Stop I want to play good joke on him because he has been attending to business too closely for a year and a purer atmosphere is what he needs Stop The trip will be a great experience for him, but remember, Tomitito, no stunt flying, because he has a bad heart, and while he has to die sooner or later never let it be said that our sense of humor killed him HORATIO"

Tommy glanced cautiously around to make certain he could afford to sit down, for an uninterrupted five minutes, and decode this message. "To begin," he told himself, "it's from Link Hallowell, whose middle moniker is Horatio. He's only used it once since his lovin' parents wrote his baptismal record in the family Bible, an' that was when the recruitin' officer pried him an' his shame apart as a matter of official record. Why does he sign himself Horatio now? Why, to conceal his

identity, of course. He doesn't say the feller *may* object to flyin' with me. He says he *will* object. Link's certain of it, even though he has kept the news from his friend. Why has he kept it a secret? Why, if he didn't, the feller wouldn't get off at San Onofre, of course. Link assures me I can argue this passenger into the plane, which means that I had better arrive heeled in case my verbal argyment fails. Well, that's easy. Continuin' with this-here digest, Link says this feller has been applyin' himself too close to business for upwards of a year and a cleaner, purer atmosphere will do him good. Tomitito mio, this here's a very windy telegram from a man of few words an' them simple an' direct. What business has this visitor been applyin' himself to for a year? His own business or Lee Purdy's or both? An' has it been dirty business? Has he been keepin' bad company? Link says a purer atmosphere would do him good! I'm sure of it or Link wouldn't spend a lot of money on a straight telegram to tell me about him, unless he had a hint to convey. Link's frugal that-a-way. He says he wants to play a joke on this *hombre*. I never knew Link to yearn for a joke before. What's the joke? Ridin' him in my old bus or kidnapin' him from San Onofre an' bringin' him home to Lee Purdy? Well, if he's mixed up with that buzzard Todd it wouldn't be no joke—or would it? That depends. Well, to continue: Link says he doesn't want me to stunt with him because he has a bad heart. Well, well, well. Tommy, my son, can you see through a ladder? Yes, Mr. Scaife, I can. Nobody knows better'n Link Hallowell that I'm no war aviator but a plain motor mechanic, trained by his boss to do

good, honest, straight flyin' for business purposes only. An' nobody knows better'n Link that a two-seated observation plane ain't popular as a stunt ship even with stunt flyers. What Link means is that he wants me to take the best possible care of this pilgrim, because he's worth more on the hoof than dressed. I mustn't kill him because Link's savin' him to git hung, 'pears like to me. I'm to be careful of him because he has a bad heart. That means he'll fix my clock if he can. Very well, Lincoln Horatio Hallowell. All is now as clear as mud—saying which, the weary traveler resumed his journey."

Suiting his action to the word, Tommy made a round of the town on the chance that he might meet again the three strangers who had seemed so anxious to pick a fight with him in the pool-room of the Arguello hotel. He was rewarded by the sight of two of them in front of the Main Street Garage, and yearned with a great yearning to interview them, but remembered in time that he had an errand to do for Link Hallowell the next day, so he flew thoughtfully back to the Enchanted Hill and put in the day installing new struts on the two airplanes which had been tampered with.

"Ought to have both ships in commission again," he decided. "We might have to transport some troops in a hurry."

About six o'clock he had the little combat Fokker Lee Purdy had brought home from France in its accustomed order again, and decided to make a short test flight over the upper valley of the Rio Hondo to observe and report back to Gail the progress of the drive

of the Box K cattle up toward the Cuyamaca Reserve. He discovered that the cattle had been combed out of the draws along the hills that flanked the valley and were being driven steadily in a compact body. He estimated that the drive would be well up toward the Reserve by the following night—probably into it.

Meanwhile Hallie had telephoned Jim Presbery over the Forest Service line, a loop of which had been run into La Cuesta Encantada by the rangers, out of courtesy to Purdy and appreciation of his cooperation in the matter of fire prevention. From Presbery she learned that the inquest had been held that day, and with this formality concluded, the coroner had signed the death certificate and given his permission to have the ranger's body shipped back to his old home in California, for interment. Meanwhile a ranger with pack horses had brought in a quantity of snow in kyacks from the mountains and in this cold bed old Steve, lacking the attentions of an embalmer, was lying waiting for the arrival of a hermetically sealed casket. It was due about nine o'clock the following morning; simple funeral services at San Simeon had been planned for ten o'clock, and immediately thereafter the body was to be placed on the Forest Service motor-truck, taken in to Arguello and shipped west on the Golden State Express. Mrs. Presbery had obtained the loan of a cottage organ from the blacksmith's wife and would it be possible for Miss Purdy to come to the funeral and play a few hymns? It would. Moreover, her guest, Miss Ormsby, would come with her and sing.

Presbery was delighted. However, he had one more favor to ask: Would her brother attend the

funeral service and make a funeral oration over Steve?

Hallie did not know. Lee was with the Box K drive, headed up toward the Cuyamaca. Mr. Presbery might send a ranger over to the drive and ask him. Mr. Presbery thanked her and said he would do that.

CHAPTER XXV

A FEW minutes before the California Limited whistled for the lonely flag station of San Onofre, Tommy Scaife settled as lightly as a gull on a bare spot a few hundred yards out in El Valle de los Ojos Negros and walked leisurely over to the station. In addition to the two forty-fives that were always on his hips of late, he carried, as an extra precaution against ambush, a light sporting carbine and a beltful of ammunition. In the shady lee of the station he squatted on his heels and waited for his man to arrive.

The train was on time. Tommy heard it slide barely to a stop and then roll on again—wherefore, he knew it had discharged a single passenger. So he strolled around the corner of the station to the side that paralleled the track, arriving just as the observation-car swept past.

On the rear platform of the car sat Mr. Lincoln Horatio Hallowell, looking quite citified and dandy in his store clothes and smoking a cigar. He stared at Mr. Scaife with no hint of recognition in his face, and Mr. Scaife, who, as we have discovered heretofore, could see through a ladder, stared back at him with an indifference quite the equal of Mr. Hallowell's. But not for long—not for more than a split second, to be exact. In fact, even for that split second Mr. Scaife did not feel that he could afford to waste the sight of

more than one eye on Mr. Hallowell. The other eye he reserved for a short, spare, sallow-looking man of undoubted urban appearance, who stood on the platform, with a new tan bag in his hand and gazed upon Tommy Scaife with marked disapproval and suspicion.

Tommy bowed to him with the meticulous politeness that is still a very distinct part of the upbringing of boys in the rural districts of the great Southwest. "Howdy, mister," he said. "I been sent down here to bring you out to Mr. Lee Purdy's ranch."

His statement was simple, direct; it had exactly the effect he thought it might have.

"Who sent you?" Doak (for it was, of course, none other) demanded, and there was fright in his voice.

"Link Hallowell sent me: that feller settin' out on the rear end o' the observation-car. My name is Scaife—Tommy Scaife, and we both work for Lee Purdy. Pick up your bag an' head north. Quick! This ain't no time to discuss details. Link Hallowell's my friend an' I've just discovered—— *Stop it. Hands up!*"

Doak had reached into his hip pocket. It stayed there! Tommy's rifle was pointed straight at his stomach; the bleak, unwinking stare of those terrible pale-blue eyes was positively paralyzing. "Hands up," he snarled again, and Doak's hands went up. Tommy immediately relieved him of a small pocket pistol, bound his hands together behind his back with Doak's own handkerchief, picked up the man's bag and started on the run for the airplane. "You follow me," he commanded Doak, and Doak followed. "Into that rear seat," he directed, as the panting pair reached the

airplane, and Tommy hurled the bag into the fuselage. To strap Doak into his seat was the work of a second; a tug at a propeller blade and the motor was humming—they were skimming across the stunted sage and into the air while Doak still sat blinking with the suddenness and ferocity of it all.

Link Hallowell had gone to the rear of the observation-car for the sole purpose of obtaining an unobstructed view of San Onofre and making certain that Tommy Scaife was there to carry out Hallowell's telegraphic instructions. When he saw Tommy on the platform and the latter gave no sign of recognition, Link knew that, as he had assumed, no blue-print had been required to enable Tommy to visualize the situation. Link's cryptic telegram had been sufficiently illuminating, and Hallowell breathed a sigh of relief as the long train rolled out of San Onofre.

"Tommy can always be relied upon," he soliloquized. "He has a head and he uses it." He lighted a fresh cigar and gazed out over El Valle de los Ojos Negros, marking with the keen eye of the cattleman the thick tufts of leguminous grasses that grew around the small sage bushes and were nourished by the dew that dripped from the sage branches. "It's good rich soil," he decided. "The sage grows luxuriantly over ninety-five per cent of the valley. With water what a garden-spot this hell-hole would blossom into! The altitude is a trifle too high for cotton—the growing season would be too short—but it would be ideal for mixed farming. A live farmer could get four crops of alfalfa per annum, and corn should do well."

His musing was interrupted by the distant purr of

Tommy's motor; he looked back and saw the ship rising over the sky-line, saw Tommy bank and turn and come flying after the California Limited. "Now, what does he mean by that?" Hallowell wondered. "I want him to go home with Doak. He mustn't come in to Arguello with him. My plan depends upon the secrecy with which it is executed. Oh, damn your thick head, Tommy!"

Right up the track behind the train, flying about fifty feet high, Tommy came roaring; as he swept past the train Link saw him lean down out of the fuselage and exhibit two fingers of his right hand, then draw both fingers across his throat.

"Hum-m-m-m! That sign talk sounds to me like a hint to look out for two men who are out to kill me. I'll watch him closer when he does it again."

Tommy had zoomed upward, banked widely and let the train pass under him. Now he was in the rear again and coming on as before. Hallowell stood erect and pointed authoritatively to the northwest in a gesture that said plainly, "Go home!" But Tommy only shook his head and waved one arm in a violent gesture of negation; again he exhibited for a fleeting instant as he passed dangerously close to the train, those two same outstretched fingers. When he returned to repeat his gesture Hallowell threw both arms upward and outward in the signal that says in all languages, "I understand."

And he was far from being happy in the possession of the information. He reasoned that if two men inimical to his welfare existed, they existed in Arguello. Tommy knew, of course, that Hallowell would

leave the train at Arguello, so undoubtedly it was of danger in Arguello that Tommy desired to warn him. Of course, nobody knew he was about to descend upon Arguello; consequently, unless his enemies should be waiting on the station platform, the probability of meeting them was not great. He could avoid the main street of the town and trust to Tommy to fly in for him, after having delivered Doak safely at La Cuesta Encantada. From a point on the outskirts of the town he would watch to see Tommy flying in and meet him at the spot where he and Purdy landed customarily.

The situation was uncomfortable only because Link Hallowell was unarmed. While, throughout the past year he had never permitted himself to travel unarmed in his own country, a becoming sense of propriety had indicated that while en route to Los Angeles he should leave his artillery at home, since possession of a large, businesslike revolver would subject him to the embarrassment of being stared at, if it did not result in a jail sentence on a charge of carrying a deadly weapon.

"And here I am, headed for possible trouble, with nothing more dangerous than a jack-knife on me," he mourned. "I cannot telephone the ranch now. If I appear on Main Street, somebody may have to carry me off Main Street. The telephone office is on Main Street and I hate to skulk, but I'll have to."

Tommy flew on ahead now, but circled back, turned and came flying over the train again just as it halted in Arguello. Link saw his hand fluttering high over his head to direct attention; then suddenly the arm swooped downward, with a pointing gesture and as the

ship roared overhead something dropped from it and clattered squarely on the ties between the tracks.

Out over the brass railing of the observation platform Link Hallowell leaped and picked up a belt, with fifty pounds of ammunition in it and a brace of forty-five-caliber revolvers in open holsters. Tommy banked over the straggling town and flew back; as he passed over Hallowell's head the latter threw him a kiss, whereupon Tommy opened his cut-out, gave voice to three mighty roars that must have been cheers and headed home.

As he buckled on Tommy's armament, a feeling of peace stole over Link Hallowell, like a rainfall in El Valle de los Ojos Negros. No longer did he feel naked. All he had to do was to beware of strangers —not a difficult task for one who knew every man, woman, child and dog in that country. He hastened up to the platform, relieved the porter of his suitcase, and checked it with the station-master.

"Any strangers in town lately?" he inquired of that functionary, as the latter stood watching him, in the semi-privacy of the baggage-room, tie the pistol holsters down to his legs and make certain both guns were loaded and working freely in the holsters.

"Yes, two. They rode in from the hills yesterday morning."

"Who are they?"

"Nobody knows."

"What do they look like?"

"One blond and one brunette. The blond is short an' thick an' the brunette is long an' lean. They're two-gun men. Lookin' for 'em, Link?"

"N-no! But I'm not dodging them either. I think they're looking for Lee Purdy, Tommy Scaife, or yours truly. . . . Well, it's a shame a peaceable citizen has to go prowling through the streets of a civilized community all dolled-up like a motion-picture actor in a western thriller. Thanks for the information, Bill."

He walked across to Main Street and turned up toward the public telephone station. Men, seeing him approach, reminded each other that the sidewalks must be too narrow for Link Hallowell, since he chose to walk in the middle of the street. . . . He came abreast of the hotel. On the veranda a tall, thin, dark man and a short, stout, blond man sat with their chairs tilted back against the wall. . . . They and Hallowell appeared to see each other simultaneously.

Hallowell's pace slackened and his gaze never faltered or shifted from the two strangers. As if moved by a common impulse both men tilted their chairs forward on all four legs and stood up. The tall man moved down the veranda about six feet and paused when Hallowell paused. The three stared at each other a tense five seconds; then the quiet of Main Street was broken by the crashing roar of pistol shots following each other with the rapidity of a riveting machine's clatter. The sounds seemed to telescope into each other; of the dozen or more citizens who had been witnesses of the tragedy not one could say later whether three shots or a dozen had been fired. All they knew was that, within a space of five seconds, the picture had changed. In the middle of Main Street Link Hallowell lay, face downward, arms outstretched, each hand clutching a gun. On the hotel porch the blond man

lay very still on his back; the dark man was down too, but raised on his left elbow, striving to lift his heavy gun for another shot at Hallowell. But his semi-paralyzed muscles refused the task; his left arm buckled under him, permitting his face to crash violently against the porch floor; his shoulders twitched a little and he was still forever.

The proprietor of the hotel was the first man to recover from the shock of the combat. He came out on the porch, looked the dead men over and turned a serious face to a neighbor who had crossed the street and was standing looking down at Link Hallowell. The other man whistled.

"That *was* a killin'," he declared.

"Well, I'm right glad they had the decency to pull it off in the street," the Boniface replied. "I been expectin' something like this to happen ever since them two come to town yesterday, an' I been scared to death they might get shootin' in my lobby. It ain't six weeks since I had that lobby all done over."

CHAPTER XXVI

STEVE MacDOUGALD'S departure from the arena of his activities was as simple and unostentatious as the life he had lived, as impressive as the forest-clad mountains and valleys he had spent so many earnest, loyal years guarding from the wasteful and destroying hand of his fellow man. When Hallie and Gail arrived at San Simeon they found Steve, dressed for the grave in his best uniform. In a very plain coffin he reposed on a bench under a huge, spreading mountain cedar tree in front of the Forest Service headquarters. Around him were grouped some thirty or forty men and women, the latter pathetically few in number, the men uncovered. Cowboys, cattlemen, rangers and forest guards, packers, guides and the old Navajo Indian, Bear Tooth, and his four stalwart sons, they represented all of Steve's little world—and when Hallie got out of her car, followed by the dead man's dog, the sight of that familiar comrade brought a tear to many a rough cheek.

Lee Purdy stepped out of the little crowd and came forward to meet his sister and Gail. "The rangers wanted me to say good-by to Steve for all of us," he explained. "The Box K drive was pretty well organized and close to the edge of the Reserve, about eight miles west of here, so when the assistant supervisor rode out and asked me I couldn't refuse. I do not at-

tend funerals, as a rule," he explained to Gail, "unless they be the funerals of my enemies. It's too much of a heart wrench to say good-by to men one respects or loves."

Little pale Hallie, clinging to her brother's arm and striving to be brave, was escorted to the blacksmith's wife's cottage organ and Gail, standing beside her, sang to Hallie's accompaniment "One Sweetly Solemn Thought." At the conclusion of the hymn, Lee Purdy, in leathern chaps and spurs, stepped up beside Steve and laid his hat on top of the coffin. For a dramatic ten seconds he stood looking down at the still face. Then he spoke—to Steve.

"Steve, we've come to say good-by to you, old-timer, and when we've done that I'm going to read for you some simple little lines from that Book in which even a pagan may find beauty and wisdom. I do not know of what religious faith you were a communicant, and I hazard the thought that you never bothered your kindly old head about it. You lived too close to Mother Earth to waste your time on thoughts of a personal heaven wherein you might encounter a joy commensurate with that which should be the due of a worthy man. Your faith was a very old one, Steve. Jeremiah referred to it when he said: 'For the mountains will I take up a weeping and wailing, and for the habitations of the wilderness a lamentation, because they are burnt up, so that none can pass through them; neither can men hear the voice of the cattle; both the fowl of the heavens and the beast are fled; they are gone.'

"Steve, good friend and good man—dear martyr, dead in defense of the faith—listen to me. I'm going

to make you a promise and confirm it after the fashion of honest men in this land that you loved. See, Steve, I touch my hand to yours, so now you may know I speak the truth, and your friends may know it, too. I have the man who took away your life and I know the name of the man whose greed and gold corrupted the assassin who slew you. 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.' Well, maybe so! But if God continues to give strength to my trigger finger, Steve, know that from your side I go to pay your score and the score of every citizen who owes such men as you a debt of gratitude, even though few of them know it. Rest easy, forester, for I, too, am of the faith. 'For the mountains will I take up a weeping and wailing, and for the habitations of the wilderness a lamentation,' since they are inanimate and may not voice the grief which your friends feel at your passing.

"At such times as this, Steve, it is customary to say of the dead the kindly things we forbore to say when he who is dead lived. I will say of you that you were a good, kindly, brave, humorous, simple gentleman, needing little and desiring little, grateful for sunlight and snowfall, for bees and birds and furry friends, for a voice over the telephone, for freedom from fires and the strength to fight them, for the voice of the cattle, the smile of a virtuous woman and the handclasp of a true friend. Because you have kept the faith with men confidently we leave you with God. Good-by, Steve. When the Chief Ranger sets you to guard the fields of asphodel, save a camp-site for us—and Whuskey!"

He turned from the dead ranger and reached for the Bible which Presbery's assistant handed him. At

the mention of his name the dog Whuskey, who had come with Gail and Hallie in the car, pricked up his ears and fixed his bright eyes on Purdy; reassured by the latter's glance that he would not be unwelcome, the beautiful animal walked toward him until, half-way there, he caught an old, familiar and beloved scent; with a short, rapturous bark he ran to the coffin and stood on his hind legs with his front paws on Steve's breast. He waited a little to be spoken to, then licked the beloved face as who should say: "Well, Steve, even if you do refuse to speak to me, I'll greet you just the same."

Strange! Steve did not awaken and he had always awakened before! Why, since puppy days Whuskey had been awakening Steve by nuzzling him with his cold nose and then warming the cold spot with his tongue. Whuskey could not understand, so he caressed his master again, then looked up at Purdy, who dismissed him with a nod in the direction of Hallie. Obediently Whuskey got down and slouched sadly back to the girl's side. He had said his good-by, and Purdy read the thirteenth Psalm of David, a prayer for help in affliction.

"How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?

"How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?"

His glance lifted from the page and rested on Gail's tear-stained face.

"How long shall mine enemy be exalted over me?

"Consider and hear me, O Lord my God: lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death;

"Lest mine enemy say, I have prevailed against him; and those that troubled me rejoice when I am moved."

Again Purdy's eyes met hers. A pause, and then his deep, resonant voice took up the psalm.

"But I have trusted in thy mercy; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation."

Another pause—and then Gail's voice finished the psalm.

"I will sing unto the Lord, because he nath dealt bountifully with me."

Purdy closed the book and stood for a little while looking at his neighbors, thoughtfully, a little sadly. Then: "We will pray a little for Steve, now," he said, "and for his mother who loved him."

"God be her comfortin'." O'Meara, a forest guard, had spoken out of the fullness of his Celtic heart. They prayed and Gail sang "Nearer, My God, to Thee." Then the assistant supervisor, acting for Jim Presbery, whose home was under quarantine, screwed the lid on the coffin, and six rangers carried Steve to the waiting truck. Thus did he leave the Cuyamaca.

Purdy kissed his sister good-by, said a word of farewell to Gail and walked over to his horse, standing with dangling bridle-reins at a little distance. But Gail followed him over to the horse and laid a detaining hand on the reins. Foot in the stirrup, his

left hand on the horse's mane, he paused and regarded her.

"You will be very careful, will you not?" she murmured, and flushed because she dared ask this of him.

He smiled upon her gravely, tolerantly, benignantly. "Naturally I would be," he answered, "for Hallie's sake."

"You must consider your friends, too."

"I haven't very many to consider—unfortunately."

"You have one more than you had a week ago, Major."

"I think you had better call me Lee—after that speech. I dislike formality between friends."

"And if I should call you Lee?"

"I'll call you Gail. And I'll be extra careful now—for your sake."

"Few women have ever made a poet," she answered with a beaming light in her wet brown eyes. "I should not care to be the woman who helped to kill one."

"Good-by," he murmured breathlessly. "And if I shouldn't see you again——"

"Why?" she interrupted. "Are you in danger here?"

"Perhaps. I didn't want to come here. I suspected my enemies might guess I'd come to Steve's funeral, and waylay me."

"Is there somebody here that you fear?"

"No. I fear no man, but I'm a coward when it comes to killing a man now, even in self-defense." He looked at her sadly. "I shall endeavor to survive, my dear. Please drive away with Hallie now. She must not know. I do not want her worried."

"I'm so sorry for you," she whispered brokenly, and turned away.

Gail drove slowly after leaving San Simeon, and for the very best of reasons. She had difficulty seeing the road through her tears. Now that she was no longer the cynosure of curious eyes, Hallie, too, felt free to give way to her emotion. As for the bereaved Whuskey, he stood on his hind legs in the tonneau, leaned over the back of the front seat and nuzzled his new mistress affectionately. It was all he could do to comfort her, for in his doglike way he *was* aware that something was wrong.

When Hallie began to sob Gail choked back her own tears of fear, stopped the car, took Hallie in her strong young arms and comforted her. She noticed then that the little invalid was trembling.

"What's the matter, Hallie?"

But Hallie had her crying spell out before answering. Then:

"You heard what Lee said?"

"Yes."

"I've known for a long time that Lee was in trouble. He wouldn't tell me what it was, and of course I wouldn't ask. If he wanted me to know he would have told me. But the night Lee came home from San Onofre with that hole in the shoulder of his coat and blood spots on his clothes, I realized matters were coming to a crisis. He fibbed and said a cow had hooked him over the edge of the runway, but if that had been the case the hole in his coat would have been the same size at the point of exit as at the point of

entrance. A cow's horn tapers to a point, you know. Lately Lee and Tommy have been carrying guns and doing night flying. I have heard them coming and going, and the day before yesterday I saw Lee, Tommy and Curly McMahon interviewing a horrible-looking Mexican on the porch of the bunk-house. Lee thought I'd be in bed, but I happened to rise early that day. I have never known Lee to fib to me before, Gail, so I know he must be in deep trouble. He hates lies—even white lies. He says it's always so much easier to tell the truth at first, because then one can forget what one has said, whereas one always has to remember one's lies so one can repeat them if necessary. I do wish Lee would confide in me, Gail."

"Men never confide their fears and worries to women. They leave that sort of thing to mollycoddles. If Lee Purdy fibbed to you he did it to protect you from worry."

"Well, for the sake of his own peace of mind I've tried to appear stupid. He must not worry over what I think or feel. When a man is in trouble he needs all of his thoughts for his problems."

"Hallie, you *are* a dear, and your half-brother is worth a dozen whole brothers."

"He *is* wonderful, isn't he? I'm so glad you like Lee. He's such a funny old thing. He never tells anybody his troubles, and is always able to appear cheerful when things look worst; he is never an optimist, but never a pessimist. He never whines for sympathy, Gail. About the time other men quit, Lee says to himself, 'This isn't going to be quite as easy a task as I thought it would be.' Then he begins to work."

"Did you know that somebody poisoned Rory the night before last?"

Hallie nodded miserably. "Tommy lied magnificently to me, but I knew. Men who are not accustomed to lying always look so sneaky and embarrassed. And they talk too much. They overplay their part. Tommy thinks he has deceived me, however. Dear Tommy! He's such a simple Simon."

"Hallie, I think he's the most awful little man I have ever seen. When he looks at me I turn cold. Those terrible eyes!"

"You should have seen them filled with tears when Lee's two English setters were poisoned."

Gail thought she could visualize those tears—mute evidence of a baffled rage that could find no other expression. Nevertheless she thought she understood now why Tommy had laughed that night as he tossed the body of Joaquin's victim into the cockpit of his plane and roared out into the night with it.

"Wasn't Lee's eulogy magnificent?" Hallie resumed. "I never knew before what an eloquent speaker my brother is. And where he found time to read the Bible and remember what he read is a profound mystery. He isn't at all religious, you know."

"I think he must be deeply religious, Hallie. Perhaps you mean he isn't at all orthodox."

"Yes, that is what I mean. Lee isn't good because he wants to be rewarded in the next world. He's good for the same reason that makes him shave every morning and brush his teeth three times daily. It makes him feel so much more comfortable. Of course Lee has been a little wild. He's lived, you know. But he's

loved life so and it's been a wonderful game to him——"

"He has killed men, has he not?" Gail's interruption was almost a whisper.

"Yes," Hallie replied soberly, "he has. But then, as Link explained it to me, he has never killed for pleasure or profit or in anger."

"Are your brother and Mr. Hallowell old friends?"

"They have known each other for about ten years. They met in Mexico during the Madero revolution. Link was managing a cattle ranch in Chihuahua when the revolution broke out and a Federal army drove off his cattle, and executed his foreman. So Link joined the Maderistas to get even. In a subsequent fight he was one of the few survivors and when he came across the Rio Grande at Ojinaga he met Lee, who was a Texas Ranger there. Link was awfully tired and hungry and thirsty and his clothing was full of holes and he needed a shave very badly. 'Hello, old-timer,' said Lee to him, 'how did you escape? I'll bet you did some running.' And Link replied: 'No, I didn't run, but I passed a couple of white men who thought *they* did. Ranger, suppose you loan me ten dollars, on the off chance that you'll get it back.' That pleased Lee, so he loaned Link the money and they became friends. Link's a dear. You'll love him."

"How old is he?"

"Thirty-two, and he's marvelously handsome. Very dark, with eyes that crinkle at the corners and lovely white teeth that show when he smiles."

"Tell me about his character."

"Oh, he loves life, too. He's very quaint and old-

fashioned and humorous. Did Lee tell you what Link said about your Box K Ranch?"

"No."

"Well, he said the ranch looked as if it were owned by a widow with seven children, all girls."

Gail laughed and made up her mind she was going to like Mr. Hallowell at sight. "I suppose Link Hallowell has been a trifle wild, also," she suggested.

"I do not think so. He may have got into bad company at times, but, as he assured me himself, it wasn't catching! Link isn't an ordinary cow-hand, you know. He's well-educated and well-mannered. As he says himself, the only thing that's wrong with him is a slight touch of poverty, and he's poor only because he'd rather be poor than stupid."

"How odd!"

"Yes, indeed," Hallie went on. "The first Hallowell to come to California was Link's grandfather, and Link says that one bright clear day in the fall of 1856 Grandfather Hallowell stood on the western slope of the Sierra foothills and gazed across the San Joaquin valley with a twelve-power field-glass and said to himself, 'All the land I can see is going to be mine.' Then he went to work in a mine and when he had saved two thousand dollars he bought six mules and a buckboard, loaded the buckboard with a camping outfit and food, and hired an Indian to drive the mules. Next he bought a small skiff and mounted it on steel runners like a snow-sled, hitched it behind the buckboard, and, while sitting in it, was towed over two hundred thousand acres of the richest land in the San Joaquin. When his voyage ended he went before the State Leg-

islature and claimed the land under the Swamp and Overflow Act. He made affidavit that he'd traversed every foot of the boundaries in a skiff!"

"The old wretch!"

"Link agrees with you; but then, as he says, nearly all of the founders of huge fortunes are old wretches. Time and philanthropy canonize them. The Hallowells were so rich by the time Link was seventeen years old that the cattle business was much too common a vocation for him to engage in, although he'd been born to it, so the family secured for him an appointment to the Naval Academy, and the very first year he was there he was asked to leave. It seems one of his classmates had an incurable habit of reciting at every opportunity 'The Face on the Barroom Floor.' He also had a habit of wiping his nose in a nervous manner about every fourth line, so one day Link put some snuff in between the folds of the boy's clean handkerchief and then egged him on to recite his piece. The poor fellow began sneezing and couldn't stop, although he kept on trying to recite just the same. His efforts brought on a nose-bleed and it wouldn't stop and the boy nearly died. Unfortunately for Link, his victim was an Admiral's son, and the Admiral commanded the Academy, so he summoned Link and scolded him and asked him what he thought he was, anyhow. Link replied that he thought he was a public benefactor—at any rate, he hoped he'd worked a cure where the Admiral appeared to have failed. *That* was impudence and insubordination, or something terrible, and it was a black mark against Link.

"Then one day when he was ordered to box the

compass, he asked his professor for shipping directions after the compass should be safely boxed. So they sent Link home where he could be funny at his leisure, and after he'd been a cow-hand three years, his grandfather made him foreman of the home ranch.

"One day his grandfather sent him over to a neighboring ranch to buy a couple of thousand head of feeders. Link came back without them and when his grandfather asked him why, Link explained that the owner wanted too much money for such poor stock. Grandfather flew into a rage and said Link was the slowest man he had ever known at learning to judge cattle; that he had seen the cattle and they were a bargain at the price quoted. Link maintained they could be bought cheaper and grandpa told Link he was a blockhead. Then Link told grandpa that for a long time he had been accumulating the opinion that slavery and working for relatives were synonymous and now he was certain of it. Grandpa commenced to shout and bluster and finally he told Link that if he resigned his job he'd disinherit him. So Link replied, 'Grandpa, just to prove to you how little I value money, I'll quit this instant. You owe me three months' wages. Keep it.'"

"What happened then?"

"Why, Link resigned, of course, and went away. Two days after he abandoned the payroll grandpa had a visit from the man who owned the feeders. He called to offer them to grandpa at two dollars a head less than the quotation Link had declined! When the family heard from Link again he was somewhere in the Texas Panhandle, so grandpa wired, 'Come back.

You are not a blockhead!' Link wired back, collect, 'You're wrong. I am. I'm making five dollars a head riding disrespectful horses and I only have to ride them once to win. Anyhow, it's a dry year in California and you haven't got any fatted calves worthy of me, so I'll not be your prodigal grandson. My advice to you is to leave your money to a board of trustees to found a chair of animal husbandry at the state agricultural college.' "

"What did grandpa do?"

"Nobody knows. He's ninety-six years old and still living. In the interim those rich lands that grandpa pastured cattle on grew so valuable for agricultural purposes that grandpa had to sell them at a perfectly tremendous profit in order to escape paying ruinous taxes on them as pasture lands."

"And has Link seen his curious relative since the quarrel?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. Link is very forgiving. He visits the old gentleman whenever he happens to be in California. Just makes a brief duty visit and is always very careful to let the old gentleman know he hasn't called to borrow money from him. Then grandpa flies into a rage and calls Link a blockhead all over again. Link admits it, the quarrel subsides for lack of fuel, and grandpa asks Link to stay for dinner, which Link does. After dinner grandpa has the butler serve the pear brandy he had brewed in 1887 and they play dominoes at twenty dollars a game and a dollar a point. The last two sessions were ruinous to Link. He had to wire Lee for money to come home on. However, grandpa did give Link each time a quart bottle

of the 1887 pear brandy, and dear old Link brought it home for me, for use when I have a bad spell."

Hallie turned suddenly to Gail and a warm flush overran the ivory tint of her wistful face. "I love Link," she admitted simply. "When I get well—when I know it will not be sinful for me to marry, I'm going to ask Link to marry me!"

Gail gasped at this amazing announcement. "How extraordinary!" she managed to respond.

"Well, not so very extraordinary, Gail. Link loves me. I know he does. That saddle-colored idiot can't keep a secret worth a cent. But he'll never admit he loves me, because I have a few dollars and he hasn't any. Link's idea of the dignified course to pursue is to wait until he has sufficient money to support me in luxury. By that time, Gail, I'll be very old."

Gail, amazed at this frank avowal, had nothing to say.

"Do I shock you, Gail?" Hallie asked.

"Not at all, dear. I understand one of your ancestors was a pirate."

CHAPTER XXVII

AT five o'clock Hallie knocked at the door of Gail's room. "Mr. Menefee has called to see you, Gail," she informed her guest. "He's waiting in the living-room."

Gail came to the door. It was obvious to Hallie that her guest had spent some hours weeping and had then made a desperate effort to eradicate the evidences of her woe as nightfall approached and the necessity for facing her hostess across the dinner table became apparent. Briefly she explained to Hallie the reasons which had actuated Henry Menefee's visit.

"Oh, well, let him serve you with his old complaint in action," Hallie counseled. "He's too late to stop your cattle from being set adrift, and if he has you up before a judge for violating the injunction you can tell the judge the injunction was served too late to avoid its violation. The poor man appears worried. Come in and be nice to him."

So Gail appeared before Henry Menefee, who solemnly handed her two documents, which Gail accepted with a smile. "Duplicates?" she queried. Menefee nodded, and Gail tossed both documents into the fire. "You may have a judgment against me by default, Mr. Menefee. I shall not bother to defend your suit. I have no money for lawyers' fees. As for the cattle, they are now so close to the Cuyamaca Reserve I can-

not keep them out. I couldn't possibly get word to my manager in time."

"Well, tell that to the judge," Menefee answered her smilingly. "He'll believe you—particularly when I tell him it's true. All I'm doing is making a magnificent gesture. I've obeyed orders. I'm licked and glad of it." He turned to Hallie. "Where's Lee? Out with the Box K drive?"

Hallie nodded smilingly and Menefee, his mission accomplished, picked up his hat and stated that he must be going.

"If Lee were here he'd shake you up a cocktail, Mr. Menefee," Hallie informed him. "May I not exercise that office? And can you not stay for dinner? We dine at six-thirty."

"Thank you, no. I'll be half-way back to Arguello by six-thirty. However, I don't mind working up an appetite for the dinner I'll have in Arguello."

Hallie left the room to order the "materials" and while she was in the kitchen the telephone in Purdy's office rang. Gail answered it.

"Hello," a man's voice greeted her. "Is this the Purdy ranch?"

"Yes."

"This is Jeff Thorne, the deputy sheriff at Arguello. Is Purdy there?"

"No."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Miss Ormsby, a guest here."

"Oh! Well, I reckon you'll do. I wish you'd get word to Lee Purdy that about five minutes ago his foreman, Link Hallowell, shot it out in front of the

hotel with a couple of strangers and all three of 'em bumped each other off. I want to know what Purdy wants me to do with Hallowell's body."

"Oh!" Gail gasped.

"I'm just leavin' my office to go up to the hotel now," the deputy sheriff continued. "Ed Abbott, the hotel proprietor, telephoned me about it a minute ago. Of course, I knew Purdy would want to know first off. You tell him, will you, ma'am, an' have him call me up."

The receiver clicked. Jeff Thorne was on his way up to the scene of the killing!

For five minutes Gail sat at Purdy's desk. Although she had never seen Link Hallowell, nevertheless the news of his death affected her second only to that of her father. Link Hallowell was dead—and Hallie Purdy loved him! Well, she would never ask him to marry her now. He had died, never knowing that in Hallie's gentle, warm little heart the flames of love had glowed brightly for him. Also upon Gail there devolved now the terrible task of telling Hallie! She shrank from it as an office too terrible to contemplate; nevertheless, it had to be done, and eventually Gail told herself that she would do it as soon as Henry Menefee had taken his departure. Meanwhile she must guard against some other friend ringing up from Arguello, getting Hallie on the telephone and blurting the terrible information out to her . . .

Gail removed the receiver from the hook, set it on the desk and joined Menefee and Hallie in the living-room. Simultaneously, through the open window there drifted in to her the distant hum of an airplane motor.

"Tommy Scaife is returning, Hallie," she exclaimed agitatedly. "I'm going up to the hangar to see him land. He might have some mail for me."

She ran all the way up to the hangar and reached it just as Tommy Scaife swept in over the tree-tops, circled the hill, landed and came taxi-ing down the mesa to the hangar. Gail was aware that the plane was carrying two passengers, but the presence of a stranger did not deter her. She was beside the plane as it came to a halt.

"Oh, Tommy, Tommy!" she sobbed. "The sheriff telephoned a few minutes ago that Link Hallowell had a fight with two strangers in front of the hotel at Arguello, and all three have been killed!"

Tommy Scaife's mouth flew wide open. "Old Link gone west?" he croaked.

Gail nodded miserably. "The sheriff told me to get word to Major Purdy. He wants to know what to do with Mr. Hallowell's body."

"I see." Already Tommy Scaife had recovered from the shock of horror her message had given him. His face was white, but his bleak buttermilk eyes were terrible to behold. "I was afraid Link'd walk into that jam, Miss Ormsby," he continued huskily. "If I hadn't dropped him both my guns he'd—be just as dead as he is now, but the men that killed him would be livin' an' plannin' their defense. . . . Well, there don't seem to be much that I can do now, 'ceptin' fly back to Arguello an' take care of Ira Todd. It was his killers that done for old Link."

He looked over his shoulder at his passenger. "We get off here, mister," he informed the latter."

He leaped out himself, carrying Doak's bag, and the latter followed. He was wearing a pair of goggles which Tommy had considerately fastened on him after tying his hands. "Sorry I had to hog-tie you, mister," his captor went on apologetically, "but that little lady gun o' yourn made me suspicious." He untied Doak's hands and stripped off the goggles. "Forward! Column half right!" he ordered. "March!"

"Why, Mr. Doak!"

Gail's expression of amazement and her familiar greeting of his prisoner gave Tommy Scaife pause. He stared from her to Doak and back again. "As you were!" he commanded the latter. "Miss Ormsby, do you know this man?"

"I do. This is Mr. Jasper Doak of Los Angeles. He is the attorney who settled my father's estate."

"Miss Ormsby," Doak pleaded, "if you have any influence with this red ruffian, I beg you to exercise it in my behalf. I have been kidnaped at the point of a gun——"

"I have no influence, Mr. Doak, and if I had I should decline to exercise it in your behalf. You are too friendly with my late manager, Ira Todd. You telephone and telegraph each other and I know Mr. Todd is a liar, a coward and a crook. We suspect him of being a murderer."

"A man is known by the company he keeps," Tommy added. "On your way, Doak. By gravy, you are a real discovery."

He took Doak down to the bunk-house and turned him over to Curly McMahon.

When he came running back up the path he was

wearing a belt and pistol and behind him came fat Joaquin José Ramon Oreña y Sanchez, similarly equipped. Gail attempted to speak to Tommy, but he ignored her. He was too busy fastening Joaquin in the seat so lately vacated by Jasper Doak; and when that task was completed he climbed in behind the wheel and hopped off.

Gail's soul was in a turmoil as she retraced her steps to the house, but out of the chaos of her emotions one thought upthrust itself definitely. Evidently Tommy Scaife knew where Ira Todd was to be found and was en route to kill him. Something told Gail that there would be no more delay on that job. Tommy Scaife or Ira Todd had to die, and that within half an hour—and Tommy had taken Joaquin with him to guard his rear—if necessary, to stand side by side with him and die for the preservation of Lee Purdy's life and liberties and the avenging of Link Hallowell's death.

Gail reasoned that in a land where law and order had so long been established, it was her duty, as a citizen, to maintain that law and order. Ira Todd might deserve death, but if he must die the law should kill him, not Tommy Scaife. Moreover, his death might involve Lee Purdy in further reprisals—already this deadly, quiet, merciless mysterious feud had resulted in the death of four men, two of whom had been worth while; presently it would result in the breaking of Hallie Purdy's heart; if it continued it might bring death to Lee Purdy.

Therefore, at all costs, she must block Tommy Scaife's murderous plan.

Down the hall past the living-room where Hallie was politely entertaining Henry Menefee, Gail ran, and on into Lee Purdy's office. "How do you call Arguello, Hallie?" she cried.

"One long ring," Hallie answered, and Gail ground swiftly at the little metal crank on the old-fashioned telephone. "Get Jeff Thorne, the deputy sheriff, for me," she called to central when the latter answered. "He's up around the hotel now. Call the hotel and tell Ed Abbott to bring the sheriff to the phone. Tell him the Purdy ranch is calling."

The deputy sheriff was on the hotel porch searching the bodies of the two dead strangers for evidence of their identity when Ed Abbott came out and delivered to him Gail's message. He stepped inside, took up the receiver, and announced himself.

"Oh, Mr. Thorne!" Gail gasped. "This is Miss Ormsby out at La Cuesta Encantada. Do you know Tommy Scaife?"

"Of course. What about him?"

"I told him what had happened, and now he's flying in to Arguello to kill Ira Todd. He thinks Mr. Todd hired the men who killed his friend. Stop him, for pity's sake. There has been enough bloodshed already."

"Thanks for the tip, ma'am. I'll stop him."

Gail hung up. But Hallie and Menefee had heard her speaking to the sheriff and their curiosity brought them to the office where Gail sat now in Purdy's swivel chair, her face in her arms outspread upon the desk.

"Who's killed who, Miss Ormsby?" Menefee demanded.

Hallie shook her guest's shoulder vigorously. "Tell me, tell me!" she cried piteously. "Is my brother dead?"

Gail shook her head. "Link Hallowell," she moaned. "Oh, Hallie, I'm so sorry! They shot him a little while ago in Arguello."

Henry Menefee's strong arm caught Hallie as she was crumpling under the blow. "Guess I will stay for dinner after all," he said gently. "Looks as if a man might be needed around here. Buck up, Miss Ormsby, and show me where to set the little one here. She's out!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

AS Tommy Scaife or the crow might fly, it was about eighteen miles to Arguello, and fifteen minutes after leaving the Enchanted Hill, Tommy, with Joaquin at his heels, came running up Main Street, headed for the crowd in front of the hotel.

"Gangway for combat troops!" he cried and the crowd parted abruptly, leaving a six-foot lane to the hotel porch, upon which the two dead men still lay, awaiting the arrival of the coroner. Tommy favored both corpses with a glance of hate and bounded into the lobby of the hotel, gun in hand. At the door Joaquin paused and faced the crowd; the black muzzle of his weapon swung in a menacing arc; he was protecting Tommy Scaife's rear.

Up the stairs Tommy ran and down the hall to room twelve. "Come out, Todd," he ordered. "Come out and settle your debts." There was no answer, so Tommy raised his pistol and crashed it through the frail paneling, then leaped aside to escape the shot he believed would be the answer to his assault. It did not come. Again Tommy raised the gun, but a shout from the head of the stairs caused him to turn in that direction. Jeff Thorne, the deputy sheriff, stood at the end of the hall, and his .45 covered Tommy Scaife.

"You bust another panel in that door an' I'll bust you," he warned.

"Take the pot, Jeff," Tommy replied, and dropped the muzzle of his gun. "I'll pay for the panel I've already busted. Where's Todd?"

"None o' your doggone business, young feller. You come here——"

Something cold and hard was pressed against Jeff Thorne's neck; a swarthy hand, reaching from behind him, closed over his pistol. "I theenk, señor, eese more better eef you geeve dose gun to me," a soft, drawling Mexican voice suggested. "I don' like for keel you, señor, but eef you mak trouble——"

The officer's hands relaxed from the weapon and Joaquin, who had tiptoed up the stairs behind him, quietly took possession of it. "Now, then, Jeff," Tommy Scaife ordered him, "come here and open this door."

Thorne stalked, cursing, down the hall, turned the knob of number twelve and threw the door wide open. "The jig's up, Ira," he called. "This is Jeff Thorne an' they've got the drop on me. Don't shoot me. I can't help it, Ira."

Still no answer came from within, so Thorne entered, with Tommy following, crouched behind the sheriff's huge bulk. The room was empty, although Todd's bag stood in one corner. Thorne opened the only closet in the room, but the fugitive was not hiding in it.

"You've hid him in another room," Tommy charged, and was about to organize a search of every room in the hotel, when Joaquin pointed to the window, which was open. Across the sill stretched a thick strip of sheeting, one end of which was tied to a leg of the

bed. Ira Todd had fashioned a rope of sheeting and blankets, let himself down within fifteen feet of the ground, risked that short drop, and disappeared.

"The Box K automobile was up in the garage yesterday," Tommy declared. "If that car has been took out, it means he's made his getaway. As soon as he knew Link Hallowell had gone west he realized it was his turn next. Damn him, he knew I'd be on his trail. Come on, Joaquin!" And followed by the faithful Mexican, Tommy went out that window, even as Ira Todd had, and fled across lots to the garage.

As he had anticipated, the Box K automobile which Todd had borrowed to come to town, was gone, and the floor man volunteered the information that Todd had been in about ten minutes before and taken it.

"Think I'll feel safer with my own guns. I'm used to them and old Link don't need 'em no more," Tommy soliloquized and returned to the hotel. "Where've they took Link Hallowell?" he demanded of the crowd of curious townspeople who still clustered around the two dead men on the porch.

"He's inside on one o' the pool tables," somebody answered, and Tommy strode inside and over to the familiar form. And then an amazing thing happened. The corpse of Link Hallowell raised its head and said:

"Well, if here isn't little old Tommy Scaife! Gun out and head down, like a hog to war."

"You horse-thief!" Tommy's glad cry rang through the room. "Oh, Link! They telephoned to the ranch an' told us you'd been bumped off." And Tommy choked up with tears and stood there, blinking down pathetically at his friend. Link Hallowell smiled up

at the poor little fellow and reached out his hand. Tommy clasped it and clung to it childishly.

"The report of my death, like that of Mark Twain's, has been grossly exaggerated," Hallowell said. "Where's Todd?"

"He was in the hotel here until the shootin' started," Tommy blubbered, and now his face was ruddier than ever, for he was developing a weakness, the shame of which he could never hope to live down. "Ed Abbott's his friend, an' I reckon Abbott run up an' told him about it. Realizin' his two killers was gone, he sneaked out the window over to the garage, got his car an' beat it out o' town. With the whole town down here I reckon nobody seen him leave. Link, old settler, how come you ain't dead?"

"Never mind about that. It'll be an hour before I'll feel like getting up off my back, and I'll be sore for a month of Sundays, but never mind that. Tommy, bend over. I want to whisper something."

Tommy's bleak glance swept the onlookers gathered around the pool table, and as one man they fell back. He bent over his friend.

"Todd was to meet Doak at San Onofre. I'm sure Doak wired him to meet him there. I planned it all for Doak. Fooled him. He didn't know me so I sold him the idea that I was one of Todd's killers. Then I wired you to come to San Onofre for Doak; I planned to come on to Arguello and capture Todd myself. I thought if we could get those two men together out at the ranch, confront them with the man who killed Steve MacDougald and with Shannon, the killer Doak hired to murder Purdy, we might, in the resultant

excitement, find out what's back of all this dirty business and stop it for keeps. Now it's my guess that Todd realizes the country is getting too hot to hold him; right now he's breaking all the speed laws getting down to San Onofre to meet Doak, to tell Doak the jig's up and to get out of New Mexico as fast as the Lord will let them."

"Then my job is to get to San Onofre, capture Todd and bring him out to the ranch?" Tommy opined.

"Right, as usual, Tommy. When Todd gets to San Onofre and fails to find Doak there, he will become suspicious and continue right on out of the state."

"Gimme my two guns, Link, an' I'll be on my way. Here's a gun for you. One of Todd's brave boys is still playin' hooky from the cemetery, so I'll leave Joaquin here to keep an eye on you, while I go after Todd."

He reloaded and buckled on his own guns, ran over to the plane and was off, headed west into the sunset and flying low over the white road that wound down through El Valle de los Ojos Negros. Half-way to San Onofre he looked overside and espied a motorcar proceeding west at a rate of speed scarcely justified by the condition of that desert road. The hood of the car was up, so Tommy's view of its occupant was cut off.

He flew high over the speeding car and when two miles ahead of it, turned and flew back, following the road until he found a spot on it where he could land. And there he waited, calm in the knowledge that if the approaching car was not the one he sought, it

would continue to approach, for, of course, the driver had seen him landing. If, on the other hand, the driver of the car was Ira Todd he would proclaim his identity long before reaching Tommy's waiting plane.

The man was Todd. Tommy was sure of that when, half a mile up the road, the car halted and a man sprang from it and ran as fast as he could through the sage toward the thick fringe of cottonwoods and sycamores along the wash that marked the course of the Rio Hondo after it emerged from the hills, to lose itself eventually in the open desert.

The range was much too long for any one except a past master of rifle shooting to hope to connect with that fleeting target, but Tommy Scaife was an optimist. He stood up in the fuselage and encouraged Ira Todd's flight with a fusillade that kicked up little spurts of sand around the fugitive, but did not stop him. Tommy was not discouraged, however. Out of a vast experience he knew that men who have spent their lives in the saddle are not apt to go very far or fast on foot. He suspected, too, that Todd was not armed, except with a pistol, and alone in the waste of El Valle de los Ojos Negros without food, water or blankets he would inevitably be captured.

Tommy reloaded his hot rifle and rolled briskly on his parenthetical little legs up to the abandoned car. As he had suspected, it was the Box K car, so he removed three spark-plugs and the platinum points from the ignition, after first running the car off the road.

"Now, then, Mr. Todd," he reflected, "hereafter you walk."

He glanced at the sun. It was just dipping over

the low hills to the west. So, concluding he had half an hour of shooting light, he strolled over toward the wash of the Rio Hondo. He knew that the sage for miles around was not sufficiently high to conceal a man, there was no underbrush along the Rio Hondo or among the cottonwoods and sycamores and the only means of concealment Todd could possibly find would be among the great wash boulders. Because of this knowledge and the fact that he was on the alert and had no mean opinion of his fast and extremely accurate marksmanship at average ranges, Tommy hoped to avoid being surprised and killed before he could move into action, although, as a matter of fact, he was perfectly indifferent to anything that might happen to him, provided he killed Ira Todd first.

He entered the wash two hundred yards to the east of the point where Todd had disappeared into it, and proceeded cautiously down the center. He even scanned the tops of the trees. When the light failed, however, Todd was still at large, although Tommy had picked up his trail and followed it down the wash for a quarter of a mile.

He returned to his plane, intending to fly to Arguello, which he could reach in a few minutes and while still there would be sufficient twilight to land safely.

Arrived at the plane Tommy set his spark and gas control and spun the propeller. To his surprise the motor did not start—which surprised Tommy, for his motor was still hot, and should have started on a quarter turn. He spun the propeller again, but still the motor failed him. So he looked under the hood and almost immediately discovered that his dual igni-

tion system had been wrecked with a thoroughness and malevolence that spelled two words—to wit, Ira Todd!

Tommy Scaife cursed and then laughed. Then he cursed again because he knew himself for a simpleton. While he had been busy crippling Todd's automobile and trailing him, the crafty Todd had hurried down through the wash of the Rio Hondo, crept out of it, circled through the sage and crippled Tommy's ship. Hunter and hunted were now afoot in El Valle de los Ojos Negros.

"Seems sorter pitiful that I got to get you, Todd," Tommy lamented. "You're a sight smarter man than I took you for; I forgot that two can play at the same game. Me, I ain't got enough sense to compete with a prairie-dog, but on the other hand, Ira Todd, you ain't got as much courage as a prairie-dog. You didn't have the nerve to climb up into my office, lie down there an' bust me when I come back to the ship, all off my guard an' never thinkin' you had the guts to come within rifle range of this ship. I wonder if you got a gun."

He rolled a cigarette and smoked it thoughtfully; eventually he arrived at this conclusion:

Ira Todd had started for San Onofre, there to meet Jasper Doak, and though Tommy had followed him half-way there nothing had occurred to give Todd any intimation that Tommy knew he was bound for San Onofre and why! Todd would think that, following the killing in Arguello, Tommy had arrived on the scene, intent on reprisals; that he had searched for Todd and been informed that Todd had left town in the Box K automobile. Certainly Todd would think

Tommy had merely flown down to El Valle de los Ojos Negros on the off chance that he might overtake him there; consequently, still firm in the belief that Doak awaited him at lonely San Onofre, Todd would continue to his destination on foot. *He had to find Doak and warn him against possible adverse developments.* Furthermore, Todd must know now that New Mexico was too hot to hold him. He would have to go far and fast and he must have money to do that. He would have to get this money from Doak, which constituted another reason why he must see Doak at all hazards . . .

"Well, I've got the Box K automobile," Tommy decided. "Guess I'll go back, slip them spark-plugs an' ignition points into the old wagon again, beat it to Arguello, see that Link's safe with the sheriff, pick up Joaquin and catch the westbound train out of Arguello early tomorrow morning. When Todd gets to San Onofre and fails to find Doak, he'll be suspicious an' frightened. He won't know which way to turn until he thinks of the one way out—the easiest way. Then he'll take a chance, hole up in the sage near San Onofre all night, flag the westbound passenger train at seven-thirty or thereabouts and make his getaway—that is, he'll flag the train if nobody comes pesterin' around the station in automobiles, airplanes, horseback or afoot. Leavin' Arguello, Joaquin will hole up in the smoker at the head of the train. I'll be in the last car. After passin' San Onofre (provided Todd flags the train) me an' Joaquin will start comin' together . . . Yes, Mr. Scaife, you're certainly the boy for Nelly. You're smart, that's what you are."

He obtained a pocket flashlight from his ship and hurried up the road to Todd's abandoned automobile. In a few minutes he had reinstalled the ignition, but try as he would he could not get the motor to turn over. So he investigated his gasoline supply and discovered an open pet-cock at the trap in the feed-line. The tank was empty!

"As the sagebrush philosopher remarked, life ain't so much in holdin' a good hand as it is in playin' a pore hand well," Tommy soliloquized. "Here's this no-account Todd exhibitin' evidences o' genius. After jimmin' up my ship so I can't fly it, he come back here an' tried to make his getaway in this car. Finding I've done things to it, he says to himself, 'Well, when Tommy Scaife finds out he can't fly he'll come back here, put this auto in commission again, hustle away to beat four of a kind an' be back in two hours with a posse. Guess that won't do nohow,' so with them few kind words he drains the gas tank an' is on his way again. Dog my cats, I don't like this hide-an'-seek business nohow. Now I got to beat it back to my ship before that onery pup returns an' sets it afire. It'd be like him to do that."

So back to the stranded airship Tommy ran, panting, and hung around it for half an hour, hoping against hope that his enemy would appear in the vicinity. Abandoning this probability presently, he began thinking again. His cogitations were interrupted by the sound of footfalls from the direction of San Onofre. "Halt! Who's there?" he challenged stridently, and dropped on his face in the dust of the road to escape the fire he expected. But nothing

happened, save that footsteps which had sounded suddenly, within twenty feet of him, while he pondered his problem, ceased abruptly.

"Chick Anthony, of the Diamond Bar Ranch," a voice replied.

"Oh, hello, Chick," Tommy greeted the new arrival. "Walk right up an' be sociable."

"You sound friendly, but suppose you name yourself. I'm shy about fraternizin' with strangers I can't see."

Tommy named himself, and Chick Anthony advanced confidently. "What you doin' afoot, Chick?" Tommy asked. "Your horse done swap ends with you?"

"No, I been fraternizin' with a masked stranger down the road here a piece. He stops me and asks me if I seen anybody at San Onofre as I rode by and I tell him no, all I seen was an airplane land there an' fly away a few minutes later."

He leaned up against Tommy's ship and sighed. "Lordy, I'm wore out! I've walked mos' a mile, I reckon, an' me with arches so broke down I couldn't even git a desk job in Washington durin' the great war."

"How come you're afoot?" Tommy repeated his query.

"I have some horses rangin' over yonder toward the little lake country an' I been over lookin' at 'em. Comin' back, I take a notion to ride in to Arguello an' spend an evenin' at draw-poker or somethin' more excitin' than the life I'm used to. I'm ridin' my best claybank pony with silver points, an' this stranger I meet hoofin' it for San Onofre takes a fancy to him. Nothin'

would do but he must have him, an' with a forty-five waverin' in front o' my nose——"

"Did you see the weapon, Chick?"

"No, it was too dark, but the feller said he had one an' me bein' unarmed myself, I thought I might as well take his word for it. So he got my palomino horse an' outfit an' a hundred dollars in bills, although I don't feel so bad about the money on account of expectin' to lose it anyhow."

"Hum-m-m! And was you layin' yourself out to walk to Arguello?"

"I certainly was. I don't aim to set here all night an' wait to pick up a ride."

"That's logic. But still you got them broken arches to consider, Chick, so let's consider 'em. Here's a rifle an' a beltful of ammunition. You stay here an' keep inquisitive strangers away from my ship while the strain of travel falls on my arches. As soon as I get to Arguello I'll send somebody out with a car to bring you in."

"Sold!" Chick Anthony declared gratefully.

Tommy arrived at the hotel two hours later and after ordering a car sent out for Chick Anthony he sought Link Hallowell and Joaquin. He found Link in bed in the hospital and Joaquin asleep in a chair in the same room.

"Any luck, Tommy?" Hallowell queried.

"Three rousing not-anys." Without unnecessary detail the little man reported, and at the conclusion of his recital Link Hallowell nodded his handsome raven head approvingly.

"Link, I'm all wore out." Tommy complained. "I

can't do no real thinkin' tonight. I've been busier'n a bootlegger all week, with no sleep to speak of, an' receivin' shocks to my nervous system every time I turn around. Now, your late death puts the crusher on me. I suppose you been shot all to pieces but not fatally?"

"I have two broken ribs and there's a sore spot around my heart that hurts worse than an ulcerated tooth. I've got the ribs taped up but my legs kept trembling so the doctor put me to bed here. He says I'm suffering from shock. Why, I was unconscious half an hour!"

"Unconscious from what? Ain't you been shot?"

"Yes, Tommy, I've been shot—with luck! I have a granddaddy living in Los Angeles. I go to see the old gentleman whenever I have an opportunity and after dinner he always makes me play dominoes with him at twenty dollars a game and a dollar a point. Well, the other night I dined with him, but owing to the fact that my cash reserve was running low and I hesitated to offer grandfather my I. O. U. in case he ruined me, I thoughtfully pawned my gold watch before calling on him. And it was some watch—a split-second repeater, with little bells that rung in it, and I suppose it must have cost the original purchaser about fifteen hundred dollars. I won it gambling at Juarez.

"Well, grandpa was in good form and about midnight it occurred to me to quit while I had the price of a ticket home, so I asked the old gentleman what time it was. Discovering then that I had no watch, he presented me with a watch his father had given him

when he came home a corporal from the Mexican War. The old man told me he didn't expect to live forever and I might as well have the watch now, because it would come to me later whether I wanted it or not. He said he was getting too old and weak to carry it around any more—and I believe him. Tommy, there it is on the table—what's left of it."

Tommy picked up an ancient watch, with a heavy silver hunting-case. It was as large as a small saucer and almost an inch thick. Imbedded in the bowels of this remarkable timepiece was a .45-caliber pistol bullet; so deep had it penetrated that the case on the reverse side was cracked and bulged.

"Of course," continued Hallowell, "I pretended to be wildly excited over his gift. It weighs close to three pounds, I think, and is as handy to wear in my vest pocket as a flat-iron, but beggars can't be choosers, Tommy, so I dragged it home with me. I was wearing it when I went into action this afternoon. Fortunately I'd been warned, so I was about a second faster than the blond man and half a second faster than the dark man. That dark man only fired once, they tell me, but I hope to tell you he was on the target. If that old ticker hadn't nestled between us, I'd be up above now, being measured for hoofs or a halo."

"You're a fool for luck, Link, although at that I reckon a volley o' mule kicks would have been easier to take. Now, if you'd been wearin' one o' those fashionable little watches, without any guts to speak of, that old granddaddy o' yourn would have to leave his bankroll to charity."

"I don't know that he'll leave me any of it and I

don't care. He did mighty well by me when he sawed off that watch on me; whether I'm his heir or not I'll always be too grateful to criticize him. By the way, Tommy, you telephoned to the ranch, did you not?"

"I didn't."

Link Hallowell sat up in bed. "You red jackass! Hallie Purdy'll never forgive you—or me, for that matter," he yelled. "Have you got brains under that vermilion thatch, or bean soup?"

"I'm all wore out. My head won't work," Tommy defended himself. "Anyhow, I had Ira Todd on the brain; I was in that big a hurry I plumb forgot Miss Hallie, although, come to think of it, ain't you sort o' givin' yourself all the best of it, Link, allowin' that girl is goin' to feel concerned about your demise? How do you know whether she's laughin' or cryin'?"

"I don't know. I'm only hoping."

"Well, then, Link, she'll have to keep on cryin' awhile, because the telephone exchange here closes at nine o'clock an' it's a quarter past ten now."

Link Hallowell sprang out of bed. "Get me a car, Tommy," he ordered. "I'm going right out to the ranch and tell her myself."

"How about Todd?"

"Todd has simplified his case by committing highway robbery. When he stole Chick Anthony's horse and hundred dollars he told us, in effect, that he realizes he cannot hope to escape westward by rail. He knows it's death to come east, and it's desert country to the south—no friends, no food, little grass and uncertain water. He knows the country to the north, however. He has friends scattered through it, he will not lack

feed for his horse or water. Tommy, a wise man would head for that wild little corner of Utah, where that state meets Arizona and New Mexico. That is No Man's Land. Down there men do not question each other and sheriffs have quit going in there because the climate isn't healthy. Todd is not a wise man, but he is not a fool. He stole that horse for a ride north."

"Then," Tommy declared with conviction, "he'll ride at night because he'll know Lee Purdy and yours truly will be out in planes looking for him. He can't make more than fifteen miles tonight and he'll hold by the North Star. I marked it down one night at San Onofre. It hangs right over Turkey Track Butte."

"Good news! Your head's workin' again. Wake up Joaquin and let's get going. Tomorrow is our busy day."

CHAPTER XXIX

IT was nearly one o'clock in the morning when Link, Tommy and Joaquin reached the Enchanted Hill. A light was burning in the living-room of the Purdy house, so Hallowell knocked at the front door and Henry Menefee came and opened it. At sight of the visitor he paled and shrank back, for although a hard-headed, unimaginative business man, Mr. Menefee was quite certain he was receiving a call from a ghost.

Hallowell grinned. "I'm flesh and blood, Menefee," he assured the latter, and held out his grandfather's watch for the latter's inspection. "I was wearing it in my upper vest pocket when the riot started and the blow of the bullet knocked me for a loop," he explained. "What are you doing here?"

"Came on business. Just as I got here, Jeff Thorne telephoned and announced your death. I found the women all alone here, and Miss Purdy collapsed, so I decided to remain and be of service if necessary. Miss Ormsby and I have been sitting up waiting for Tommy Scaife to report. Has Tommy been killed, too?"

Link Hallowell entered. "Nobody's been killed, and I have not had the honor of meeting Miss Ormsby. You might present me, Menefee."

He followed Menefee into the living-room and was duly presented. While Gail stood staring at him, too amazed and puzzled to acknowledge his respectful

bow, Henry Menefee thrust the watch under her nose and explained the situation. Gail took the ruined relic, examined it and then appraised the pale but smiling Hallowell.

"Since you refuse to stay dead, why are you not in jail, Mr. Hallowell?" she asked.

"Jeff Thorne had a hazy idea he ought to hold me as a mere matter of formality, but finally decided that I couldn't even be convicted of manslaughter in the second degree, so he let me go on my own recognizance. He knows I'll be on hand to testify at the inquest over those two victims of misplaced confidence. Where's little Hallie?"

"Abed, weeping for you."

"Wonderful! Marvelous! How I love to be wept over—by Hallie! Please run and tell her I'm alive, Miss Ormsby."

Gail departed instantly, bearing with her the evidence of Link Hallowell's charmed life, while he followed and in the deep shadow of the veranda awaited the effect of her announcement. It came in a few minutes in the shape of a little figure, in dressing-gown and slippers, hastening down the veranda toward the living-room.

"Tag! You're it, Hallie," cried Mr. Hallowell, popping out at her. He swept her into his arms, wotting naught of the twinge of pain that signaled the crushing of Hallie Purdy against his left breast. And there he held her for one long, ecstatic minute, his sun-tanned cheek held close to hers, his lips caressing her little soft ear . . . Presently he said in a very firm voice—the voice of authority:

"Hallie, I love you and you love me. Do not attempt to deny it. I know! One of these days when my ship comes in you're going to be Mrs. Lincoln Horatio Hallowell. That's the program, young lady, and if you refuse to take the program I'll curse the day my grandfather gave me his watch."

"Link, darling, you've been telling your grandfather about me."

"Marvelous woman! I have. How do you know?"

"Because he wrote and told me so. Also, he advised me to propose to you if you didn't propose to me, otherwise I'd lose a good man. He said you were the only Hallowell on the list with sufficient courage and independence to tell him to take a jump in the lake—whatever that means. He said he heard I had some money that was interfering with your happiness, and offered to match me, double or nothing for it, if you continued to be a stiff-necked idiot. Meanwhile, to prove his good faith, he enclosed me a deed, in your name, to a cattle ranch in northern California. He says it will support forty thousand head and the ranch is stocked now."

"The antediluvian old horse-thief! Hallie, sweetheart, we'll put a plaster on that ranch and get Lee enough money to kick the money-changers out of their temple. I'm obliged to you, ma'am, for offering to marry me. How many more pounds do you have to gain before we can couple a bill of health in the betting with a marriage license."

"Ten, honey. And I'd gain that in three months if Lee could clear up his troubles. Worry and not tuberculosis keeps me from getting well."

Mr. Hallowell, all regardless of the resultant pain, crushed her again to his breast and kissed the tip of her adorable nose. "Sweetheart!! Will you send my grandfather a telegram tomorrow?"

"Certainly. What shall I say to him?"

"Just say: 'Link is a blockhead. Take it from me you do not have to jump in the lake. Please come to our wedding three months from tomorrow.'"

"Link, you old blessed thing!"

"Hush! Don't say anything that may be used against you later. Who is Miss Ormsby?"

Hallie told him.

"Mighty lucky for you I saw you first," he reminded her. "That girl's as beautiful as an army with banners. I like her. Because why? Because she looked at me approvingly." His bantering mood passed then and he continued, "Hallie, dear, I killed two men this afternoon. I didn't want to, but I couldn't help it. They were gunmen guarding Ira Todd at the hotel and they thought I was coming for Todd, or perhaps they were there to kill Lee and they knew they'd have to kill me first or last and then Tommy. At any rate, Hallie, we shot it out and I won. I'm not sorry I killed them, and nothing will come of the incident."

She kissed his cheek. "If you had loved me less, or if you had been less of a friend to my brother, you would not have had to do it, my dear. It was a terrible choice you had to make, and only a man can choose as you did. We will not speak of it again, Link."

"God bless you, Hallie. You're the rarest of God's gifts to worthless man—an understanding woman. Where's Lee?" She told him.

"He'll be camped with Jake Dort and the boys somewhere over in Hot Creek Meadows. I'll join him in the morning, Hallie. Good night, my dear. When I return we'll solve the puzzle. Remember, you start taking on ten pounds more weight tomorrow, and three months from tomorrow you and I are going to disprove the myth that two can live cheaper than one." He kissed her and was gone.

Next morning Tommy Scaife, with Link Hallowell, and the latter's saddle, bridle, rifle and pistol, and his own and Purdy's binoculars in the spare two-seater, hopped off the Enchanted Hill just as the gray light was beginning to show in the east. Twenty miles to the northeast they circled over Hot Creek Meadows until the growing light showed them several hundred head of cattle on the bed grounds and at a little distance a camp-fire and chuck wagon. So they landed and shortly thereafter were in consultation with Purdy and Jake Dort.

Purdy listened, without comment, to Tommy Scaife's recital of the interesting events of the night previous, and when he was in full possession of the facts of the situation he turned to Jake Dort.

"Jake, we're on the edge of the Reserve now and can leave the cattle to drift where they will from here. Link wants a good horse from the *caballado*—he's brought his own saddle and bridle. We'll mount up and move out right after breakfast for Turkey Track Butte, then swing south in a skirmish line with half-mile intervals between riders. Meanwhile, Tommy will patrol El Valle de los Ojos Negros and report to us by dropping a message, if he should locate Todd.

Tommy, I'd take the scout plane for that work. You can make more ceiling. Climb about twenty-five thousand feet, then kill your motor and drift out over the valley. If Todd doesn't see you or hear you he may continue to travel today, and in that open country you should not miss him. Better stay home this morning, Tommy, and patrol after luncheon. It'll be noon before we get to Turkey Track Butte."

Tommy nodded and flew back to La Cuesta Encantada. At one o'clock that afternoon, after thirty miles of hard riding, Purdy's mounted party reached Turkey Track Butte, a bare brown cone that rose some two thousand feet above the desolate, rolling, broken country that marked the northern limit of El Valle de los Ojos Negros. Purdy climbed several hundred yards up the Butte and with his binoculars swept the bluish-gray plain for ten miles to the southeast and west, but in all that vast expanse no living thing moved.

They went into bivouac that night at a water-hole some ten miles south of the butte; the horses were unsaddled, hobbled and turned loose to graze on the bunch-grass scattered among the sage bushes. With one man on guard the tired riders rolled up in their blankets and slept, the guards relieving each other at two-hour intervals. An hour before daylight the horses were caught up and the posse broke camp, fanned out to right and to left of Purdy who rode center, and, in a line five miles long, they pushed south at the first crack of dawn.

CHAPTER XXX

IRA TODD had definitely burned his bridges behind him when, finding himself a fugitive, he had yielded to momentary panic and, trusting to the darkness to conceal his identity, had robbed Chick Anthony of the latter's horse and money. He needed both, which, to a man in Todd's extremity, constituted sufficient warrant for the crime. A man of much more than average intelligence, he had realized when Ed Abbott came to his room to regale him with the details of the killing in front of the hotel, that his affairs, which had been going badly of late, had now come to a definite impasse. With the passing of his capable hired gunmen he was now without adequate protection; Link Hallowell had been killed, and Todd realized that reprisal would be swift and certain and would be administered by Tommy Scaife or Lee Purdy. Hence, when Ed Abbott returned to his recently redecorated lobby, Ira Todd had stood not upon the order of his going. He went!

The promptness with which his Nemesis overtook him had made him panicky. He might have turned his car and retreated to Arguello, but there, he reasoned, Lee Purdy might be waiting for him. And with Doak at San Onofre, as he had wired Todd he would be, the necessity for getting to San Onofre was too imperative to be disregarded. He *must* warn Doak, for upon

Doak much depended. Doak had money with which to defend in court any criminal charge which Purdy might bring against one or both of them, should they succeed in escaping the former's forthright vengeance for the death of Hallowell and for the public insult which Todd, in his madness, had heaped upon Purdy.

Having cleverly evened the odds against him—in fact, bettered them a little by setting Tommy Scaife afoot also, Todd hurried through the darkness down the road toward San Onofre, until Providence brought him face to face with Chick Anthony, who had halted when hailed after the manner of his kind. Time was the essence of the difficult contract which Ira Todd had undertaken now—escape from Lee Purdy's wrath—and a horse could make far better time than a man. So he talked a minute with Chick Anthony, whom, in the dark, he no more recognized than did Anthony recognize him. Upon learning that the latter had ridden past San Onofre station at dusk and had seen no one there, the instinct of the predatory animal in Todd warned him that all was not well. Further questioning elicited the information that Chick Anthony, while still a few miles west of San Onofre, had seen an airplane light there. Subsequently, he had seen it rise and proceed in the direction of Arguello.

To Todd, then, the situation was perfectly patent. If Doak had got off the train at San Onofre, Tommy Scaife, in some mysterious way made aware of the fact, had flown to San Onofre and captured him. Could it have been that Link Hallowell had been coming for him, Todd, when the latter's gunmen opened fire on Hallowell and killed him? Had that bungler whom

Scaife had dropped into the yard of the Box K Ranch talked before they killed him? And what had become of that lunatic Mexican Herrera? MacDougald had been killed, yet the fellow had not reported in. Where was he? Was it possible that he, too, had fallen into Purdy's hands, that now they had Doak out at La Cuesta Encantada and were coming for him? Did they want him alive or did they want him dead?

These and a hundred other questions Ira Todd asked himself in as many seconds—and then, in that moment of desperation, he did that which stamped him irrevocably as without the pale of honest men, making of him an outlaw, to be hunted down and killed on sight, like a mad dog.

Having dismounted Chick Anthony and satisfied himself that the latter was unarmed, Todd led the horse a few yards down the road, mounted and fled at a gallop. At San Onofre he rode round and round the depot, shouting Doak's name, but when no answering hail greeted him, despondency settled over him like a blanket.

Which way was he to turn? As Link Hallowell had analyzed the situation, so did Ira Todd. He must ride north, around Turkey Track Butte, bearing thence northwest into Utah. A week of hard riding would see him safe. As for food—well he had his pistol, and a diet of jack-rabbit would suffice. At isolated cow camps he would be welcome to supplement this diet with brown beans, coffee and fried cow. . . .

He fitted his stirrups carefully, in preparation for the long ride, adjusted the saddle, watered himself and the horse at the trough in the cattle corrals, and

through the starlit night headed out across the desert to where the north star glowed in the heavens. At daylight he dismounted in a grove of mesquite trees near the edge of one of the little muddy, slightly brackish lakes in the heart of the valley. Here he unsaddled and permitted his weary mount to roll; when the animal was cooled out, Todd undressed and bathed, then led the horse into the lake and washed him, after which he hobbled the animal and turned him loose to graze. Then he turned in, on the saddle blanket, in the shade of a mesquite tree and slept until mid-afternoon. Upon awakening he looked straight up through the branches of the mesquite tree and high in the heavens caught the reflected light of the sun on something white that floated silently through the azure sky, in great circles. Lower and lower the airplane, for such Todd knew it to be, floated, until it was some eight thousand feet above him, when it slid off into the east, volplaning until it disappeared in the heat haze; then, very, very faintly, to Todd came the purr of the motor. Tommy Scaife had dipped as low as he dared and then started his motor for the run home to La Cuesta Encantada.

"He's seen the horse," Todd reflected, "and if the man I took that horse from has reported his loss in Arguello, every ranch on the telephone line, every ranger for fifty miles around, has a description of the horse. I should not have washed him. A bright cream-colored horse with silver mane and tail against a gray-blue earth! Not so easy to miss. No, I should have left the dirt on him after he rolled. Still, if I want him to last me for his hard going on a slim grass ration, I've got to take the best possible care of him. Damnation!

Scaife knows I'm camped here and he'll guess which way I'm heading. A posse from the Ranger headquarters at San Simeon will be between me and the Turkey Track before I can get there, unless I take a chance and ride in daylight."

The more Ira Todd thought the situation over the more despondent he became. He knew now, for a moral certainty, that Doak was a prisoner at La Cuesta Encantada and he wondered what admissions Doak might make, when confronted with any considerable evidence Purdy might possess. It would be like the fellow to sacrifice Todd to save himself.

Suddenly he had a brilliant thought. Why attempt to escape to the north of Turkey Track, around which Purdy would be certain to have drawn a cordon of horsemen? Why not head due east across El Valle de los Ojos Negros, to La Cuesta Encantada? Fifteen miles away he could see the white ranch-house perched on the crest of the hill, and the sight fascinated him. *That* was one destination nobody would suspect him of a desire to attain. Well, why not try for it? Why not arrive there at dawn next morning, hide in the oak trees in the cañon below the hill until Tommy Scaife should hop off for another patrol of the valley, then climb to the ranch-house, institute a search for Doak and shoot it out with whoever guarded him?

He canvassed the situation at length and the more thought he gave to it the more reasonable the plan appeared. The chances were overwhelmingly in his favor that Scaife, Purdy and his riders would be out combing El Valle de los Ojos Negros for him; probably one man would be guarding Doak, and they would have

him in the barn or in the bunk-house. There were automobiles at La Cuesta Encantada, also. . . . Hah, he had it! He would silence that guard forever, release Doak and take that closed car belonging to Purdy's sister. Then he and Doak would kidnap the girl and drive toward Arguello, but bear off on a branch road before entering the town. At San Onofre they would drop the Purdy girl and continue on in the car across the state. Presently they would abandon that car, steal another and take its owner with them in order to hide their trail. When he had served their turn they would drop him in some lonely strip of country and at some principal station along the railroad they would purchase tickets to Los Angeles and secure a drawing-room, in which they would remain throughout the journey. In Los Angeles he would lose himself while Doak returned to his office and prepared to fight the case should criminal action be commenced.

While many aspects of his plan were, of necessity, a trifle vague, nevertheless Todd did not hesitate. He realized that he must trust to luck and his ability to take advantage of situations as they arose; in any event, this new plan for escape was far superior to the one he had contemplated at first.

He saddled his horse and headed boldly out across the plain. He watched distant La Cuesta Encantada, and no airplane rose from it, although, half an hour after he started he was gratified to see an airplane circle in to the hill and land there.

"I was right," Todd exulted. "Scaife saw my horse and flew east until he was out of my sight, then circled around to the north and warned them up yonder."

He pressed on with absolute assurance now. As night was falling he rode his weary horse into a cluster of oak trees in the cañon at the foot of the northern slope of the Enchanted Hill, tethered him, covered himself with the saddle blanket and went to sleep.

He was awake long before daylight. Hunger and thirst did that for him. He was forced to lie suffering in the oaks until mid-forenoon, however, before he saw and heard Tommy Scaife leave the hill; immediately he mounted his horse and rode up to the mesa.

He was desperate, staking all on the success of his altered plan. There must be no shilly-shallying now. He tethered his horse to a large sage bush behind the hangar, looked into that, found nobody there and walked boldly to the horse-barn. It, too, was empty. Down through the oaks he prowled toward the bunk-house and mess-hall. In the kitchen he heard the Chinaman, Chan, singing a ballad of far Cathay, and though he longed to descend upon the Celestial and pay the score he owed him for a cracked and aching head, yet did he resist the temptation. His immediate business lay with a more important and dangerous man, so he continued on to the rear of the bunk-house. Through its single window he peered into each room in turn until in one of them he saw a sight that caused him to tremble with terror.

On the floor, tied hand, foot and knee, lay Diego Herrera. The craving for marihuana was on him now and he moaned and moved and twitched in his wretchedness. Lying on his back on an iron bed, with his hands tied together behind the bedpost, lay Jasper Doak, and in the doorway of the room, calmly smoking a

cigarette and gazing out across El Valle de los Ojos Negros sat one of the Purdy riders whom Todd knew very well—Curly McMahon. He nursed a rifle across his knee.

The window was open! Without the least hesitation Ira Todd poked his pistol through, took careful aim at the back of Curly McMahon's head and fired. Curly slid forward on his face out onto the porch, nor moved nor quivered once.

Through the open window Todd scrambled into the room and possessed himself of Curly McMahon's rifle. In a detached way he observed that blood was flowing from under Curly's hat. He then stood over the squirming wretch Herrera, who, in his drug-created terror, had slain Steve MacDougald. "You might just as well be dead as the way you are, Herrera," he remarked coldly. "Anyhow you're too dangerous to be left alive in Purdy's hands and I can't be bothered with you." Quite coolly and calmly he blew the Mexican's brains out, turned to Doak and released him. The latter rose, pale and shaken, from the bed and stared at Todd in fear and loathing.

"Come on, Doak," Todd ordered. "If we stay here we'll swing."

He thrust Curly's rifle into Doak's hands. "Pull yourself together, man," he commanded brutally. "You're shaking like a girl. If you see anybody coming it will be an enemy. Shoot him. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Hallie Purdy was in the patio garden, snipping with shears the dead blossoms off a clump of geraniums, when the gate slammed and Ira Todd strode across

the garden toward her. She regarded the haggard, unkempt and desperate wretch with mild interest until, as he came nearer, she saw the big pistol in his hand. "Wh-what do you want?" she quavered.

"I want you," Todd replied briskly. "I'm going to steal you and your car." He looked past her to where Gail sat on the veranda, doing some fancywork. Behind her Whuskey lay outstretched, his bright brown glance on Ira Todd.

"Miss Ormsby," Todd advised her, "I am going to take Miss Purdy with me as a guaranty that her brother will not hamper my departure from this country. Tell him that any attempt to pursue me will mean that my capture spells death to this girl. If I'm cornered I'll kill her as sure as death and taxes, and then shoot it out with them. On the other hand, if Purdy takes my program, no harm will come to this young lady. You tell him. That's all clear, isn't it?"

Gail nodded. She could not speak. "Come on," Todd commanded Hallie. "I have no time to lose."

Hallie glared at him with loathing and contempt and instinctively recoiled from him. "Come here," he roared. The girl turned to flee and with a long leap he was upon her. "You might as well learn here and now that I mean what I tell you," he snarled, and swung and shook her viciously.

"Mr. Menefee!" Hallie screamed. "Oh, Mr. Menefee! Help!"

Help was at hand. It arrived in the form of a sable-and-white streak that rose off the veranda, cleared the railing and with a short, throaty growl launched itself over Todd's right shoulder at his unprotected

neck. The man uttered a little, surprised, moaning cry as Whuskey's long white teeth met in his neck, just below his right ear. A savage tug and Todd fell over backward. The heavy collie leaped clear and as Todd sat up and reached for the pistol he had dropped in the brief mêlée, Whuskey snapped at the groping hand and ripped it cruelly. Tail up, little ears cocked, the dog stood there alert, ready, appraising his antagonist for a second or two; then, deciding apparently that he could afford to hold the man cheap, he closed with him again. . . .

Henry Menefee, summoned from inside the house by Hallie's frenzied scream, arrived on the run. Todd was lying quietly on his back and the dog was still worrying him, when Menefee bent over the animal and slapped him smartly across the side of the head. "Let go, Whuskey," he commanded. Whuskey obeyed, trotted off a few feet and sat down, ready to renew the contest should necessity arise. His white ruff was flecked with bright splotches of blood.

Menefee knelt by Todd for a minute, examining the still form; then, while his body shut from Hallie's view a sight never intended for her eyes, he called to Gail, "Take Miss Purdy into the house, Miss Ormsby."

When he was alone with Todd he broke off several large clusters of the geranium bushes and piled them around Ira Todd's right shoulder and neck. The scarlet blossoms, merging with the underlying color scheme, hid something very unpleasant, and Ira Todd made no objection, for he was dead. Whuskey's teeth had met in his jugular vein and death had been almost instantaneous.

"You don't permit men to rough-house those you love, do you, Whuskey?" Menefee addressed the dog.

Whuskey thumped the grass with his tail and smiled amiably, as collies do to their friends. Later he offered no objection when Menefee led him to a water tap and washed from his loyal breast the blood of the man who had slain his first love.

CHAPTER XXXI

WHEN Tommy Scaife flew in an hour later he found Gail waiting for him in front of the hangar.

"Ira Todd called here this morning and Whuskey killed him in the patio," she announced.

Tommy stared at her white face long and earnestly. Then: "Nice doggie!" murmured Mr. Scaife.

"Todd came here to release Jasper Doak," Gail went on. "He sneaked around behind the bunk-house and shot Curly McMahon through the head. . . ."

"He killed Curly?"

"No, but he shot the corner off Curly's skull, although the brain doesn't appear to be touched. Curly's unconscious, but he isn't bleeding. Hallie wants you to get into the two-seater and fly in to Arguello for a doctor."

"What has become of that Mexican killer Curly was guarding?"

"Todd killed him on the principle that dead men tell no tales."

"How about Doak?"

"Todd released him and armed him with Curly's rifle. The Chinaman heard the shooting at the bunk-house and ran down from the kitchen to investigate. He carried a rolling-pin with him—it seems he was rolling out some pie-crust at the time. Doak tried to

shoot him, but the rifle was set at 'safety' and Doak didn't know how to unset it so he could shoot. While he was fussing with it——"

"That heathen Chinee whanged him on the *cabeza* with the rolling-pin, tied him up and has been guarding him ever since," Tommy interrupted. "The way that little yellow devil has been actin' lately I'll lay you ten to one he's been livin' entirely on heart of wildcat."

He taxied into the hangar and Gail helped him run out the two-seater. "There's a palomino saddle-horse tied back of the hangar, Miss Ormsby. I saw him as I flew in. That horse belongs to Chick Anthony. Please tell Henry Menefee, if he insists on stickin' around in the hope o' being useful, to unsaddle that animal, put him in the barn and introduce him to a whole lot of water and oats." He spun the propeller and while the motor idled, warming up, he ran down for a look at Curly.

"I've always heard Todd couldn't shoot for sour apples," he declared upon his return, "an' now I know it. He had that common habit of flinchin' an' throwin' his gun up when he pulled. Curly's goin' to go bare-headed a right smart spell but I don't reckon there's any real danger o' Lee Purdy pryin' that worthless waddy off the payroll. Have you telephoned to the coroner in Arguello to come up an' take away the deceased dead corpse of your late general manager? No? Well, then I'll 'tend to that, an' after I get back with the doctor I'll fly off and send Lee and Link home."

He climbed into the ship but had an additional thought. "You got any iodine or some sort o' disinfectant like that, Miss Ormsby?"

"No, but I have listerine. Will that do?" she asked.

"That's a mouth-wash, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, tell Henry Menefee that if he just naturally will insist on bein' neighborly an' useful, he might wash out Whuskey's mouth. That fool dog has sure been playin' with somethin' unholy."

Tommy flew out into El Valle de los Ojos Negrôs that afternoon, but remained there to ride Purdy's horse home while Purdy, with Link Hallowell and the latter's equipment, came home in the plane.

Straight to Hallie, Link Hallowell went. "Remember," he said, as he accorded her a loverlike greeting, "that three months from today you've got to show me ten pounds gain on an honest scales. Menefee, it's been mighty good of you to guard the girls here while we were all away," he continued, turning to the general manager of the Southwestern Cattle Loan Corporation. "By the way, you must know this scoundrel Doak."

"I do—slightly. He is of the law firm of Doak, Erlin & Doak. One of the Doaks is Abner and the other is Jasper, his nephew. Abner Doak and John Erlin control the Southwestern Cattle Loan Company; Erlin has a string of banks throughout the Southwest, also, and Doak, Erlin & Doak are the counsel for these banks and the Cattle Loan Company. Jasper Doak is just a sort of fifth wheel in that law firm. When the Union Stock Yards at Los Angeles were built a great many cattle upon which we held mortgages were marketed there, and we had to have a legal representative to look after our interests in Los Angeles. So Jasper Doak was sent to open a branch office there. He was also sup-

posed to be fiscal agent of the loan company and get some California business for it. He's no friend of mine, Hallowell. His uncle is a nine-minute egg, but an honest man. His only besetting sin is a yearning for an extra two or three per cent."

"Have you any idea what he and Todd have been up to?" Purdy asked. "Of course their scheme has been to ruin Miss Ormsby and me and buy our ranches at twenty-five cents on the dollar, so naturally Jasper Doak had sufficient influence with your people to induce them to call our cattle loans. But there must have been something else—some prize greater than a cattle ranch that they were scheming for."

"I can tell you that, too," Menefee replied. "I've been talking with Doak. Of course, he was glad to see me. At a time like the present he regards me as a member of his family, so he started a trading talk with me immediately, and nominated me his emissary to see what I could do to aid him with you. It seems, Purdy, you have coal on this ranch. Doak had an engineer's report on the proposition in his hand-bag, and I have read it. A twenty-seven-foot seam of the finest coking coal in the world runs right across this country for miles. It runs through this hill. It only requires twenty-nine hundred and six pounds of this coal to make a ton of coke, and the engineer is of the opinion that this seam is at least a mile deep and a continuation of the famous Mesa Verde seam. Todd discovered it first and told Doak about it. About that time Doak was in touch with a Los Angeles syndicate very anxious to establish a large steel mill in that city. Within eighty miles of Los Angeles there are millions of tons of

excellent iron ore, but of course it's worthless unless one can secure coal from which coke can be made to smelt the ore. And there is very little coking coal on the Pacific Coast.

"Well, Todd sent in a ton or two for a sample and Doak had coke made from it. The quality of the coal was so superior that Doak realized you were the possessor of a tremendously valuable asset of the existence of which you were ignorant. So they tried to buy you out. They were not particularly interested in the Box K Ranch. There is no coal on it and while Todd wanted it for cattle range and schemed to get it, he knew he could smash Miss Ormsby at his leisure. Although they offered you a nice profit on your ranch you refused it; they raised the offer and still you refused, so they started to make this country an unpleasant place for you to live in. They reached the bank that held the mortgages on your ranch and they reached the cattle loan company that held the mortgage on your cattle—and one day you surrendered and told Todd you were willing to accept a reasonable offer. Then they realized you were still in ignorance of the real value of the ranch. Todd was managing the deal and he had an arrangement with Doak whereby, when you should be beaten to the ground and forced to sell at their price in order to save something out of the wreck, he was to receive the Box K Ranch and a hundred thousand dollars in cash for his services. Also he was to be permitted to run cattle on your ranches as long as he lived. Todd saw himself falling heir to your grazing permit in the Cuyamaca; he saw himself running forty thousand sheep in El Valle de los Ojos Negros; he saw him-

self the cattle king of New Mexico and he would have been content with that. They had the coal sold as soon as they were in position to deliver title, but for some reason you were hard to convince."

"Lee thought I was getting well in this climate and at this altitude, Mr. Menefee," Hallie informed the loan agent. "That and the fact that he loved his ranch more than cash money caused him to reject those alluring offers."

"Well, they *had* to buy the property cheap," Menefee continued, "otherwise they would not have had sufficient money to make the initial payment your brother would doubtless have demanded. Finally Todd hit upon the simple expedient of doing away with you, Purdy. Your death would bring the deal to a boil very promptly. So Doak engaged a man he knew, who didn't make good, and Todd hired four men with Doak's money. The result of that happy thought you all know."

"But could Todd and Doak be quite certain that New Mexico coal could be delivered in Los Angeles at a price that would be attractive to the steel syndicate?" Hallowell asked.

"Coal within six hundred miles of Los Angeles was pie for them. They had already secured a favorable freight rate."

"But the coal lies at least twenty miles from the main line railroad——"

"They had an arrangement perfected to have the Santa Fe Railway Company build a spur right up to La Cuesta Encantada. They wanted to operate here, because it's a two percent grade all the way to Arguello.

The loaded cars would go down to the main line by gravity; by fitting armatures to their wheels they would generate sufficient electric power to pull the empty cars from the main line up to the mine. The natural conditions made for the cheapest kind of transportation."

"Are you going to try to trade me out of Jasper Doak?" Purdy asked.

"I am not. I never liked that man and now I know why. He can fight his own way out of the dirty mess he's floundered into. He's horribly frightened. When he saw me he couldn't talk fast enough to get the story off his chest. I brought him over for a look at Todd and he grew hysterical and blabbed it all out to me. I hope they give him life."

Henry Menefee glanced at his watch. "There doesn't appear to be any legitimate reason for me remaining away from my business any longer," he declared. "Guess I'll prowl along. Purdy, we can use the money you owe us as soon as you sell your coal." He shook hands all around and departed. Purdy turned to his sister.

"Hallie, will you run out to the kitchen and tell Conchita to rustle up forty dollars' worth of ham and eggs for your future husband and me. I'm hungry enough to eat a mule raw."

"I'll tell her, Lee," Gail offered. "Hallie has started today to accumulate weight and she mustn't run it off as fast as she puts it on. Besides, Hallie hasn't been having a very good time lately."

"Don't mind me, Gail," Hallie countered. "We Purdys are tough and rough, aren't we, Lee? One of our ancestors was a pirate."

Purdy glanced toward Gail. "And another relative, while a private citizen, once roped and dragged to death a man who had shot at him twelve times with a pistol, and from whom he was doing his level best to escape on horseback. Later, that same relative, while a member of the Texas Rangers, bumped off a human hyena without even telling the man he was under arrest. He knew the man would not submit to arrest because arrest meant hanging subsequently—and the human hyena had killed a Ranger sent to arrest him a week before. Only men with soft heads practice Christlike theories on scum like that. Later, Hallie, you will recall that your relative turned cow-thief along the Rio Grande. So did Link Hallowell and Tommy Scaife. They had a syndicate and used to steal back from Mexican bandits the cattle and horses which said bandits stole from Texas, New Mexico and Arizona ranchers. Their cut was fifty percent of what they stole, and the last time they stole anything the syndicate had to thrash two hundred Mexican cavalrymen in order to live and grow up into men of large emprise. So our foolish government tried all three of us for violation of the neutrality laws and couldn't make it stick and——"

Gail flushed darkly. "You do not have to explain anything to me, Lee," she assured him. "You never did, really. I loathe explanations, and I'm so happy to know that in the future your lot is to lie in pleasant places. Your worries are over and mine have commenced, so if you please, Lee, after dinner tonight I'd like mighty well to be told how to run a cattle ranch and make a payroll grow where there isn't any seed."

"Why wait until after dinner, my dear?" Lee Purdy replied, with his wistful, prescient little smile. "It isn't the slightest trouble for me to show goods. I'm a smart man, I am. The easiest and best way for you to cure your worries will be to sell your ranch to Tommy Scaife. Airplanes and cows constitute a curious mixture, but Tommy knows both from head to tail and I've always told myself that if I could ever afford it I'd set Tommy up in business for himself. As soon as I can sell my coal I'll give you a fair price for your Box K Ranch—about twice as much as Doak would have paid you."

"You've bought something, thank you."

"Meanwhile," little Hallie chimed in, "I'll loan you enough money to meet your payroll. When father died, Lee wasn't mentioned in his will because father had bought this ranch for Lee and stocked it, but I inherited a third interest in a cotton mill in Worcester, Massachusetts. Ira Todd and Mr. Doak didn't know that. They didn't know that I was behind you, did they, Lee, darling? Of course, old foolishness, you wouldn't let me get behind you, but in a pinch I would have had to be obeyed. Link, you come out into the yard with me. I want to show you something."

She bore her swain away, like a tug convoying a battleship.

Lee Purdy stood with his back to the fireplace looking at Gail very contemplatively. Then:

"Gail, it does look as if I'm to be a coal baron."

"It does, Lee. And I'm so happy for your sake."

"What are you going to do with your young life after you sell your ranch?"

"Really, I haven't given the matter any consideration, Lee."

"Want me to advise you?"

"I'd be very grateful."

"I advise you to become a coal baroness, Gail. It's an easy life and you will not have to live in New Mexico unless you care to. I'll reform. I'm ready to settle down into a tame mild-mannered coal baron and I think you'd be able to get along with me. However, I don't much care what you think about me any more. The day I picked you up at San Onofre I made up my mind I'd marry you if all hell popped, and I'm going to do it. We haven't known each other very long; but—oh, thunder, come here! I love you, and if Hallie returns and discovers I haven't smothered the opportunity she so generously gave me by removing herself and Link . . . well, here, I see, is the grave of my masculine liberty! I'll have to go to you. . . ."

He had her in his arms; his earnest, eager face, long and honest like that of a good horse, was bent over hers. "Are you going to be the Baroness Gail, of La Cuesta Encantada?" he demanded. "Speak now or remain forever silent."

"I love you!" she murmured, and lifted her face to his.

"God is good," murmured Lee Purdy, "and the devil's not half bad, once you get well acquainted with him."

He kissed her! Then he kissed her again, for his troubles were vanished and he could afford to!

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